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IN THE FAMILY**

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MacDONALD**

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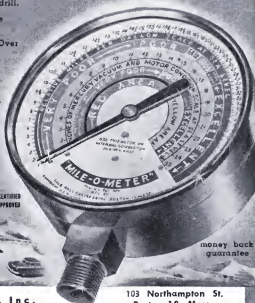


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BUD WENT TO THE RESCUE AND THEN...

HEY! WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA
OF BEANING ME?



HER SHOUTS DROWNED BY THE ROARING
WATER, KAY STEVENS THROWS A STONE
TO ATTRACT THE YOUNG FISHERMAN'S
ATTENTION, BUT THEN...

IT'S MY BROTHER!
HE'S HURT ON A
LITTLE ISLAND
UPSTREAM

LET'S GET
GOING! SUNSET'S
ONLY AN HOUR
OFF!



JUST A
SPRAIN, I
GUESS, BUT
I CAN'T
WALK

...AND I
CAN'T CARRY
HIM

WE'D BETTER
GET ASHORE
FAST. IT'LL
BE DARK
SOON



WHEW! NOW IF YOU'LL
MAKE OUR PATIENT
COMFORTABLE, I'LL
HIKE DOWN AND
GET MY CAR

LET'S BUILD
A FIRE FIRST TO
GUIDE YOU
BACK



AN
HOUR
LATER

DOC PETERS IS
COMING AFTER
SUPPER. WON'T
YOU STAY AND
SHARE OUR
TROUT?

THANK YOU,
YES! BUT WITH
THIS BEARD
I MUST LOOK
LIKE A
TRAMP

USE MY
RAZOR,
IF YOU'D
LIKE TO SHAVE



THESE ARE
THE SLICKEST-
SHAVING BLADES
I'VE EVER RUN
ACROSS. MY FACE
FEELS GREAT!

SOLD ON THIN
GILLETTES,
EH? WELL,
THEY'RE
PLENTY
KEEN



PROBABLY JUST
A SPRAIN, BUT
WE'D BETTER
X-RAY IT
TOMORROW

I'LL BE
GLAD
TO DRIVE
YOU IN

COME EARLY
AND HAVE
BREAKFAST
WITH US

ISN'T HE
HANDSOME?



MEN, SHAVINGS A BREEZE... QUICK,
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READY for the RACKETS

A Department

Dear Detective Fans,

As long as there's a sucker, there'll be a swindler. And the real sucker is the one who, having been swindled, goes on his way with a philosophical shrug and a smarting purse, saying that *he* won't be caught that way again and who cares how many other people fall for the line that tripped him up.

Police have complained for years—ever since there were police—that swindlers were hard to nab, because so often their victims refuse to enter a complaint. They're ashamed to admit they've been foolish.

That's what this column is for. It's to prevent some of you from falling for a line of soft talk and to give the rest of you a chance to air your grievance without, if you feel that way, giving your name. Get back at swindlers. We've all been taken in our time. Help others avoid losing their money.

You can do it by writing out your experiences with a swindle, addressing them to The Rackets Editor, c/o *Dime Detective*, 205 E. 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. We'll pay you \$5.00 if we can use your letter, but we cannot enter into correspondence regarding your letters, because of the press of mail in the office. Neither can we return any letters unless they are accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes.

A Dollar Down—The Drain

Dear Sir,

Last summer, I was "taken" by a new slant to the magazine racket. This was worked by a young woman who came to my house one day. She had a list of the most popular magazines with cut-rate prices for two- or three-year subscriptions. As my husband likes to read a great deal, I was tempted to buy some. I made up my mind when the lady said that I would only have to pay a dollar to her and should send the rest of the money to her company office.

I didn't think there could be anything wrong with this, so I ordered seventeen dollars' worth.

I sent the money in and the first month's supply arrived complete. The next month we received a letter saying that the company we had bought our subscriptions from had sold out and another company had taken over. It also

said that they regretted that they handled none of the magazines we had ordered and so would be forced to substitute their own choices. And from then on we got some small, inferior publications that we had never heard of before.

I hope that this will save some other housewife from suffering the same experience.

Mrs. Christine Boruta
Buffalo 19, N. Y.

"I Been Clipped!"

Dear Sir,

Recently, in Chicago, I took my small son to get a haircut. When we entered the barber-shop, it was obvious that the barber was quite upset.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I've just been swindled," he replied. "A man came in here just now and asked me if I could give him change for a ten-dollar bill. I said sure and handed him ten singles, and he gave me a bill and hurried out of the shop. When I turned to put the bill in the cash register, I discovered that, instead of giving me a ten spot, he had handed me a one-dollar bill.

"I dashed to the door, but he was gone, so I called the police. The queer part of it was, though, that when the police asked me for his description, I couldn't remember what he looked like, or what he was wearing. The only thing I could remember about him was that he needed a haircut."

R. L. Peeden,
Cincinnati 37, Ohio.

Stocking Story

Dear Sir,

I want to tell you of a neat trick pulled on several other women and myself.

It was a busy day, rushed as only beauty parlors can be rushed just before Christmas. A well-dressed, youngish man came in, carrying a suitcase, and told his tale of woe. It seems that a lot of his lady customers placed orders for nylon hose and then failed to come in and pick them up. He had to pay for them himself, he said, and so was willing to sell them at cost. While he was talking, he showed us several pairs. They came in boxes of three, and he told us that to break the box would spoil the set, in case we wished to give them as gifts. The boxes were lovely, and you could see the hose through the cellophane top—at three dollars a box they made a nice Christmas gift.

Several beauty operators bought a few boxes apiece, then several customers; not to be out-

(Please continue on page 8)

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Address _____
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SEND STRIP OF PAPER TO SHOW RING SIZE

(Continued from page 6)

done, I bought one box, but would have bought more if I hadn't been a little short of cash.

The man departed, and we were all pleased, until one of the ladies opened the box. The nylon hose were nothing but cheap cotton stockings! In a few minutes we all realized that we had been swindled. Apparently the hose which he showed us as samples and the ones he sold us were two different things.

Mrs. Rosalia Bouchard,
East Pepperell, Mass.

Up in Arms

Dear Sir,

I don't think I will ever be able to forget the following strange experience:

I went to a church bazaar one evening and was eating supper at a long table. As often happens in cases like this, we started to talk with each other, even though some of us were strangers.

The conversation turned to the activities of the church, mainly the charitable work. One of the women present, unknown to the entire group—elegantly dressed, refined and intelligent—said that she was very much in sympathy with what we were saying, as she was deeply concerned about a needy, but also exceedingly proud, family. The mother was an invalid with an incurable illness, and, being loathe to accept charity, they were trying to keep her at home, with the insufficient earnings of the father and the help of a daughter of school age who was taking care of the home and the two younger children.

She said it was quite a tragic situation. The family seemed to feel that her interest and liking for them was genuine and sincere, and she had succeeded in making them accept from her and some of her friends occasional help in the way of clothing, etc. But what they really needed was some cash for medicine and at least a partial payment on the doctor's bill. Therefore, she was selling chances on an imported cut-work tablecloth with twelve matching dinner napkins, an exquisite and expensive article that had been in her trousseau but had never been used.

We were all immediately interested and made a grab for our purses. The chances were twenty-five cents or five for one dollar. She took out a leather-bound book and gave each of us numbered coupons. To me she gave her name, address and telephone number and said that the drawing would be in three weeks. There was a tremendous crowd present, and we took pains to introduce her to everyone possible, explaining the good work she was doing. And did the money roll in!

I didn't expect to win, but I was anxious to know the results of this and how the worthy family was getting along, so at the end of three weeks I called the number she had given me. Strangers answered the phone. They had never heard of her. I made it my business to drive to what she told me was her residence, and people who had lived there for fifteen years

also told me that she was unknown to them.

It was just a dishonest, money-making scheme, nicely timed and placed to prey on the sympathy and pocketbook of a gullible, well-intentioned public.

M. K.,
Chicago, Illinois.

A Swindler in Every Port

Dear Sir,

A sailor usually thinks he knows the swindle angles in foreign countries, but here's one swindle from the very young group that fooled a lot of us.

As I walked into the business district of Hong Kong, a ragged little street urchin, who couldn't have been over ten years old, ran up to me, yelling, "Souvenirs, mister?"

I stopped to look at his wares when out of his pocket he sneaked a hammered-silver bracelet, selling for over fifteen dollars in the shops. He offered it to me for a dollar, and I knew that he probably had stolen it. He was looking about warily for the cops and kept the article hidden. I gave him a ten-dollar bill and watched him count out the change.

There was a commotion behind us, and we both looked up, expecting a policeman. Seeing none, but being in a hurry, I took the change—which he had rolled into a round roll to conceal better—and the bracelet which was in a box.

We went our ways, and I looked at my bargain. The box contained a cheap brass bracelet. I looked at my change. It was a one-dollar bill wrapped around a roll of worthless Japanese currency.

K. D. Coy,
Quonset Point, R. I.

Unemployment Assurance

Dear Sir,

I was out of work for quite awhile in Los Angeles when I met a good friend of mine whom I had not seen in six months. When I told him of my idleness, he took me to a swanky employment agency, where I saw lots of people, from all walks of life, sitting on benches in a room outside the manager's office.

When I saw the number of jobs listed on the blackboards, I felt a lot better. There were many jobs open—as bus boys, waiters, pantry men, a few cooks—at a huge new summer resort hotel twenty miles outside town. The only thing any of us had to do was apply for the particular job we wanted.

I filled an application blank. The secretary, an attractive middle-aged woman, explained to me that the boss had to charge twenty-percent of the salary, due to many expenses incurred, but she assured me that I would get the bus-boy job.

"Come here tomorrow afternoon for a personal interview by the hotel's owner and manager—and be sure to bring your fee," she said.

I went early to the employment office the next day. I thought I'd be the first one, but other

(Please continue on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

applicants were ahead of me. The manager called us into the room behind his office to meet the hotel's proprietor and his assistant.

We were lined up in single file. The proprietor and his assistant were distinguished-looking gentlemen. As they interviewed me, their successful appearance gave me more confidence. The secretary wrote out a receipt for twenty dollars which I paid the agency for the job.

In the morning, feeling pretty good to be employed at last, I went down to the agency again. There was a large and gloomy crowd gathered. Some of them were swearing to themselves. The office was closed, and the manager had run away with our deposits. I had no job and had been swindled out of the only money I had.

Eddie Albalas,
Clarksburg, Calif.

Service With Guile

Dear Sir,

We pulled into a small California service station one day and had our gasoline tank filled, because of their bold, red highway sign, which read: **STANDING OFFER! FIRST FIVE GALLONS FREE!**

And we were charged the full price.

"But the first five gallons were supposed to be free!" we protested, pointing to the sign.

"Them first five gallons went to the first customer this morning," the old codger grinned. "Come early tomorrow and maybe you'll be the lucky one."

J. D. Callahan,
Lincoln, Neb.

Sellers Beware!

Dear Sir,

For several weeks in the late summer and early fall, a young lady, well-dressed and soft-spoken, kept coming into our salesroom to "see about getting a car." The salesman showed her all the literature and gave demonstrations of all the models available.

Finally one Tuesday, late in the afternoon, she appeared and said that she had made up her mind to wait for the 1951 models and asked if she could make a down payment on her selection, to be delivered early in 1951. That was satisfactory, and she gave her check for a hundred and fifty dollars. Naturally, being late in the afternoon, her check would go to the bank with the next day's receipts.

On Thursday, she appeared in our salesroom saying that she had a chance to get a 1950 car at a very great saving and would like her down payment returned. Since her check had been deposited the previous day, we issued her ours.

On Friday the check she had given us was returned by our bank, marked: **ACCOUNT CLOSED.** Needless to say, she has not been in the salesroom since, and all our efforts to locate her have failed. We have since learned that this same trick was worked on another dealer just a few blocks down the street from us and for the same amount.

Perhaps this will give other dealers and sales people a warning about accepting checks and issuing good cash refunds too soon.

Lynn J. Bradford
Ferndale, Mich.

Mail Fall

Dear Sir,

The Joneses were going on a vacation. I agreed to sign for their mail. They had been gone three weeks, when a huge box arrived, addressed to them. I signed for it, noting at the time that it was addressed to the Joneses in care of my name.

In the next couple of months this signing for boxes became a habit, and my basement was overloaded. One day I received an indignant letter from a family in the next state, asking me for information about the Joneses. They had disappeared—and so had sheets, blankets and utensils loaned to them.

I was amazed and alarmed and not at all sure what I should do. Then another letter arrived from another family, on the same order as the first. Two days later another one came. Finally I took all three to the local police and told them the story. They removed the things from my basement.

Two weeks later, the Joneses returned—to find themselves in a good deal of trouble. They had had a neat and simple set-up. They would move into an almost empty house in a strange town. Mr. Jones would get a job and let it be known that they needed furnishings for their house until such time as they could afford to buy their own. The good-hearted people donated their things.

Everything that could be conveniently crated was sent home, care of me. The boxes in my basement contained everything from pots and pans to curtain rods. I never again signed for anyone else's mail.

Jean Stowe
Isabel, Kan.

The Ring and the Hook

Dear Sir,

The following happened to some friends of mine—an elderly couple in comfortable circumstances, well-known in their community. They lived in a large apartment hotel which also catered to a few transient guests. The man had retired from his watch repairing and jewelry business.

While they were sitting in the lobby one evening, a young woman started talking to them. She told them that she was a widow and had recently moved to the hotel. She said she was attracted to them because the wife reminded her of her own dear mother, whom she had not seen for three years. She seemed happy in their company and in a few days was addressing the woman as "Mom."

A short time later she called on them. She asked the husband to examine what she said was her engagement ring under his jeweler's glass, which he did. It was a high-grade stone, almost flawless, nearly a carat, set in a narrow hoop of

(Please continue on page 111)

MEN! WOMEN! take orders for famous NYLONS GUARANTEED 9 mos.

ONLY YOUR
SPARE
TIME
NEEDED

NYLONS GUARANTEED NINE MONTHS

Sensational Guarantee is creating a tremendous demand for Wilknit Nylons! Mrs. Robert Franklin of Ohio started out with me and made \$56.00 the very first week. Mr. Cadman, of Rhode Island, did even better. His first week's earnings amounted to \$68.37. Mrs. R. E. Page of Massachusetts chalked up \$177.94 worth of orders first week out. These exceptional earnings give you an idea of possibilities.

GUARANTEED AGAINST RUNS—WEAR AND EVEN SNAGS! Why is it so easy for Wilknit Salespeople to get orders? I'll tell you—It's because we stand back of Wil-

knit Nylons with the most amazing guarantee you have ever heard of. Your customers can wear out their hose. They can develop runs. They can even snag or rip them. No matter what happens to make Wilknit Nylons unwearable . . . within 9 months . . . depending on quantity, . . . we replace them free of charge under terms of our guarantee. No wonder women are anxious to buy Wilknit! And no wonder it is easy to quickly build up fine STEADY year around income. Earnings start immediately. Look at these exceptional figures—Ralph Shearer made \$97.11 first week. Mrs. Paul Bates \$42.82—Mrs. Fry Gentry \$43.37. Doris Jensen in addition to making as much as \$17.00 in a day, earned 2 cents an EXTRA bonus.

SEND NO MONEY JUST NAME AND HOSE SIZE

JUST MAIL COUPON. When you send for Selling Outfit, I also send your choice of Nylons or Socks for your personal use. Just rush your name for the facts about the most sensational line of hosiery for men, women and children ever offered. At this time we are appointing a limited number of men and women. Be first in your locality with WILKNIT'S most

beautiful hosiery of the year—every pair guaranteed for quick, easy and profitable sale. Mail coupon or penny postcard today, and learn at once how you, too, can earn big money in FULL or SPARE TIME and qualify for an EXTRA BONUS over and above your daily cash earnings.

L. Lowell Wilkin

WILKNIT HOSIERY CO., INC.
43-M MIDWAY, GREENFIELD, OHIO

Look at these Exceptional FIRST WEEK EARNINGS

Space permits mentioning only these few exceptional cases, but they give you an idea of the BIG MONEY that is possible in this business starting the very first week.

Mr. E. L. Lippard, Texas
\$59.32 first week
Mr. Clarence Bush, New York
\$41.24 first week
Mr. Ralph Shearer, Ky.
\$67.11 first week
Mr. Horatio de LaRoche, Cal.
\$68.84 first week
Mr. Boyd Shaw, Tenn.
\$53.46 first week
Mr. W. F. Gardner, N. C.
\$63.49 first week

Mrs. Arnold Jense, Mich.
\$64.68 first week
Mrs. Fred Pitheth, Jr., Wis.
\$41.82 first week
Mrs. Morton Horne, Ga.
\$48.92 first week
Mrs. Hazel McClean, Ill.
\$40.33 first week
Mrs. Pearl Rivers, Minn.
\$63.87 first week
Mrs. Pete Dickson, Ohio
\$81.32 first week



A Car in 2 Months PLUS \$1,007.60 Cash!

"Naturally I was honored winning a new car and I am happy to have won the car in two months when we had a whole year to win it in. My commission for two months totaled \$1,007.60. I have

earned as much as \$50.00 a day and \$50.00 to \$40.00 a day commissions have not been unusual. It is a high privilege and I may say on honor to represent the Wilknit Hosiery Co."

Frank C. Schultz

FUR COAT ALSO GIVEN!

(\$200.00 Retail Value Includes Federal Excise Tax)
Genuine I. J. FOX Creation

If you already have a car you can get this beautiful I. J. Fox Fur Coat instead of a car. Or you can get both Car and Coat without paying out a penny.

L. Lowell Wilkin, WILKNIT HOSIERY CO., Inc.
43-M Midway, GREENFIELD, OHIO

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Hose Size

Please rush all facts about your guaranteed hosiery money-making plan and FREE CAR or FUR COAT offer. Everything you send me now is FREE.

MY HOSE SIZE IS _____

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZONE _____ STATE _____

A Dash of Pepper

By SKIPPY ADELMAN

GRACE WILEY, a telephone operator in Springfield, recently got herself juggled for attempting a highly original version of the perfect crime. Grace, though quite attractive, was a spinster at the age of 31. For the past five years she had been in love with a married man: Martin Holt, an undertaker in a neighboring town. In the last year Grace began demanding that Holt divorce his wife and marry her, but the undertaker refused.

Grace came to the decision that the only way she could become Holt's happy wife was to first destroy the woman who now held that position. One night, when she knew that Holt was away from home collecting a body, leaving his wife by herself, Grace drove to the neighboring town armed with the following: a stomach pump, a bottle of chloroform, sleeping tablets, a box of red pepper, a flashlight, rubber gloves and a toy pistol. Her plan was to chloroform Mrs. Holt and then administer a fatal solution of sleeping tablets and water into her stomach with the stomach pump. Before leaving her car, Grace sprinkled the red pepper to her shoes; she had read somewhere that this would prevent bloodhounds from picking up her trail.

Mrs. Holt, who was a dozen years older than Grace, was asleep in her bed when the telephone operator creeped in and clamped a chloroform-soaked rag over her nose and mouth. Mrs. Holt refused to expire according to the plan.

She sprang out of bed and, to Grace's dismay, began to do battle. Grace tried to beat Mrs. Holt unconscious with the flashlight and toy pistol. Mrs. Holt went to work on her attacker with her finger-nails. The bloody struggle between the two desperate women ended when Mrs. Holt got her teeth around Grace's hand, biting deeply into three fingers and nearly severing one of them. Grace finally managed to tear herself loose from Mrs. Holt and run to her car.

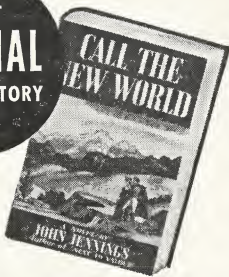
Mrs. Holt was unable to identify her assailant for the police. Her husband had done an excellent job of being discreet. But Grace, before driving back to Springfield, had stopped off at a girl-friend's house to change her blood-soaked things. The girl-friend, suspecting what Grace had been up to, and afraid of being arrested as an accomplice, informed the police.

Grace was arrested, and she sobbed out the whole story. At first the police were amused by her preposterous attempt to commit murder, but when they saw Mrs. Holt's bloody head encased in bandages, their faces grew grim. The final, crushing blow to Grace's mad daydream of becoming the second Mrs. Holt came when Holt returned to town the next day.

The dashing undertaker was brought to the police station and told the entire story, whereupon he repudiated Grace entirely and hurried forth to comfort his wife. ♦ ♦ ♦



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The author was himself in London during the "blitz," was torpedoed in the Mediterranean, and ranged the crags of North Wales to get setting and color for the final death struggle on Traitor's Mountain. If you like to breathe sea salt and mountain mist, to partake in escapes and sudden journeys, to adventure in the best of company on the hills and the high seas—this is the book for you.

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The story is Peter Brooke's, his adventures and his loves, but he moves against the stirring events of history. Battles around Washington, campaigns in Chile and Peru, negotiations in London, and finally President Monroe's world-changing message are described with the effectiveness and vividness one would expect from the author of "Next to Valour."

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DEATH RUNS

After seven years, Kip Merrit came back to his girl—to find her married, moneyed . . . and very nearly murdered.

CHAPTER ONE

Blood, Cousin

I DROVE into Paynesburg a few minutes after noon. Even though I had never been there before, it was like driving seven years into the past, returning to look once more at the source of that tiny, hidden discontent that had been with me ever since Jody walked out.

Nothing could have been simpler than the layout of the town. It was on the flats at the intersection of a north-south and east-west highway. I came from the east and saw it far ahead of me. Trees, church spires, a few square ugly buildings above the trees. "Entering Paynesburg," the sign said, "Pop. 13,822. We love our children. Drive slowly."

A few minutes after noon on a steamy day in the middle of May, a day to warn you what the midwest heat would be like in the full swell of summer, riding across the plains like a great crested wave.

I cruised around for a time, getting the feel of the town. The eastern side was the old side. The baggy pants side. What industry there was seemed to be focused in the northeast, where the railroad came in. Where the two big highways intersected, there was a bank, a department store, a gray stone church and the city hall. The park was west of the corner, on the north side of the east-west highway. A couple of movie houses. North-west was old residential. Big houses, blighted elms. The south west was cracker-box new—ranch type, Cape Cod, pseudo-modern new.

Every town has its own flavor. This was the sort of town the young folks leave. This was a town which denied, as far as possible, the existence of a better life anywhere else. This was a town in the iron grip of an ultra-conservative minority.

Jody's town.

I found a parking place not too far from a small restaurant with an imitation stone



Jody was standing by Laura.
"Is she—"

In The FAMILY

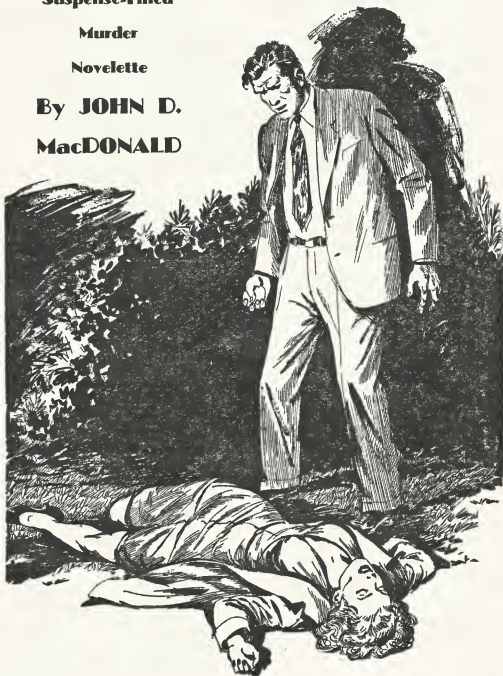
Suspense-Filled

Murder

Novelette

By JOHN D.

MacDONALD



front and wide clean windows. It was packed, but there was a seat at the counter. The specialty was the business-man's lunch. I decided it would be all right for an ex-businessman. She'd whistled and crooked her finger, and I'd come running. Fourteen hundred miles. Sold out my small agency for a fat price, locked the bachelor apartment and come running. When I thought about it, I didn't think much of myself.

There was a booth in the back. I found the name. Roger C. Dowling. It wasn't a dial system. I heard the phone ring. A soft and unfamiliar female voice answered.

"Mrs. Dowling, please."

"Just a moment."

A wait, with my heart thumped, and then the old voice—the old voice with the deep wild music in it. "Yes?"

"Jody? Kip Merrit. I got your letter."

"Why, Cousin Kip! How perfectly wonderful!"

"What's with this cousin business?"

"On vacation, Kip? Now don't be silly. You're not going to stay at any hotel. You come right out here to the house."

"So I'm your cousin now."

"That's right, Kip. Gee, it's going to be wonderful to talk over old times."

"Isn't it?"

"I can hardly wait to see you."

"I got the address off your letter, honey. I'll be out in twenty minutes or so."

I hung up. Near the front of the place I shoved a couple of quarters in the cigarette machine. It had a mirrored front. I looked at myself, trying to remember what the twenty-two year old guy of seven years back had looked like, the guy who had been in love with Jody. Softer in the face, probably. Now the bones thrust hard against the tanned skin, and the eyes didn't give away much, and the black hair wasn't cropped in that army cut.

The cashier told me how to find Claremont Drive. She said the name with profound respect. I found out the reason when I turned south on it at the west edge of town. It was the only curved road in the area. Landscaped. Crushed stone, rolled flat, glaring white in the sun. The houses didn't show up much behind their walls and high hedges. Number eleven had the name *Dowling* cut out of copper and riveted onto a black wrought-iron plate fastened

to a cedar gate post. The gate was open.

I drove in. The house was a hundred yards back. Big, sprawling frame ranch-type with a Tory chimney, black shutters against blazing white, good type detail. The asphalt drive made a wide swing around an antique street lamp set in the middle of a manicured grass plot. The door of one stall of the three-car garage joined to the house was up, showing the back end of a little chartreuse convertible with a black top. I picked what looked like the logical door to enter and parked.

Just as I got out, the door was flung open and Jody came running to me. The same Jody. No change. No change at all until she got up close, looking up into my eyes with her mouth trembling, as she said, "Oh, Kip, thank God you came!"

Then I saw that though her waist was as incredibly slim as ever, the out-curve of hip was thicker and her chest deeper. But her shining black hair was worn just the same, cut straight across at the level of the black, black eyebrows, falling to her shoulders, curling under at the tips. The greeny-gray of her slanted eyes had deepened, as always when she was excited. The lipstick, in squarish pattern, still made her mouth look harsh.

"Old Cousin Kip is here," I said.

Her fingernails dug into the back of my hand. "Play it that way, Kip. You can remember enough about me to make it good."

She turned with a swirl of the deep blue corduroy skirt as a tall girl came to stand in the open doorway. "Dear, come and meet my cousin. Kip, this is Laura, my step-daughter."

Laura's hand was cool and firm in mine for a very brief interval. I guessed her at about twenty or twenty-one to Jody's twenty-six. She was a pale-skinned blonde with a firm level mouth and direct blue eyes. She wore faded dungarees, tailored for a female. They had copper rivets. She wore a white T shirt that was not tailored for a female, and Laura was quite pronouncedly of the female species.

"Jody has been telling us about you, Mr. Merrit," she said. The emphasis was flat. It could have meant anything. I looked into the level blue eyes for some trace of mockery and decided that playing poker with Laura would be a bad idea.

"Since I'm part of the family," I said, "you better call me Kip."

"I hope you can stay a long time, Kip," Jody said. "Laura, maybe Steve could help with the baggage."

"There's just one bag," I said. I took it out of the back end. "Car all right here?"

"There's a stall you can run it into later," Jody said. Laura had disappeared.

"You've got it nice here, Jody. Nice enough so I can understand a few things that baffled me for seven years."

She gave me one wicked flash of those gray-green eyes. "We'll talk later, Kip."

The inside of the house matched the outside. Pale birch paneling, white woodwork, some Williamsburg blue, built-in book shelves, a lot of early American furniture that was good enough not to be obtrusive.

"I'll take you back to your room first, Kip. Then you can meet my husband and Steve. Steve's just a friend, of course, but he sees so much of Laura it almost seems as though he lives here."

JODY let the way into a bedroom wing. It was good to walk behind her and watch her walk once more. Mexican women who balance things on their heads walk that way. All the movement is from the waist down.

She went through an open doorway. It was a guest bedroom with a nubby, gray wall-to-wall rug, deeper gray walls, a soft yellow ceiling. The bed had a yellow spread and there were touches of bright yellow and deep green in the room. A small bath with a stall shower opened off the far corner from the hallway door. The three wide casement windows looked out across clipped green lawn and a small winding stream with willows by the bank, a small garden house down near the willows.

It was odd watching her be the capable hostess. It was something new she had picked up. "We're pretty informal, Kip. Breakfast when you feel like it. The cook is named Marta. We'll be having dinner in, tonight."

"Quite the lady of the manor house," I said softly.

"Shut up, Kip."

"For about five years I wanted to kill you on sight."

"Please," she said, but her voice had grown weak.

I put my hands on her shoulders. Her eyelids sagged heavy, and her mouth grew soft. "In the unit we called them Dear John letters. I never thought I'd get one."

"Kip, Oh, Kip," she moaned. She tried to turn her head away, but I found her lips. The old wheel started to spin again. Dizzy wheel. Crazy wheel. Jody, of the warmth and the music and the madness. We lost balance and staggered. It always happened. We couldn't kiss unless we were braced against something. Slowly the drunken glaze melted away from her eyes, and her mouth firmed up, and the shallow lift of her breathing deepened.

"Wipe your mouth," she whispered. I used tissue from a box on the low bureau, and she leaned toward the mirror and used one too, repairing the smeared edges of the lip pattern. She took the two tissues into the tiny bathroom and flushed them down.

"No more of that, Kip. Please."

"Easy to say."

"You want to meet my husband now?"

"I'll be out in a few minutes. I want to unpack and rub off a little road dust."

"When you're ready, straight down the hall and to your right, Kip."

After I'd shut the door, I decided on a shower. I put the clothes in the closet for the wrinkles to hang out. After the shower I put on a yellow sport shirt and gray slacks.

Jody was alone in the big living room, staring out the windows that faced a small flagstone terrace. She turned as she heard me.

"I just checked," she said. "He's awake now."

I followed her down another hallway to a big sunny room at the end. A starched red-headed nurse with rain-water eyes, a ripe Slavic face and a chorus line body rose to her feet with a rustle, laying her magazine aside.

"Don't leave, Miss Lipcheck," Jody said.

I followed her over to the bed. Roger Dowling had been a big man. Now, just the bones were big. What flesh and skin remained was pasted over those bones like crumpled gray blotting paper. Just the eyes were alive. And looking into them was like looking into black deep pits of torment. They had the deep, remote glow of mortal sickness. I thought of kissing

Jody, and I wanted to go back and take another shower—with a wire brush and yellow laundry soap.

Jody bent over and kissed his forehead. The dark eyes softened. "Darling, this is my long-lost first cousin, Kip Merrit. Kip, my husband, Roger."

His voice was a deep weary rumble. "Glad to meet you, Kip." He lifted a skeletal hand. I took it. There was a surprising strength in his grip. "Afraid I can't be much of a host these days. Jody and I want you to feel at home here."

"Thank you, sir."

Miss Lipcheck rustled again. "Time for your shot, Mr. Dowling," she said.

"Mr. Merrit, Miss Lipcheck," Jody said.

Miss Lipcheck nodded. The rain-water eyes were wise. And there was something remotely contemptuous in them. There was a small sterilizer on the far table. She rustled over to it, with a hip-swing that didn't seem exactly professional.

"We'll come in again later, darling," Jody said. She bent and kissed his forehead again. She was gay and bright and cheerful. Once we were out in the hall, she hunched her shoulders and shuddered violently. Her face was twisted up.

"Bad?" I said in a low tone.

"As bad as it can be. He's having a pretty good day. It's only a matter of time, and he knows it. The worst of it, he's developed a tolerance to the drugs they use, so that now they don't touch the pain."

"How long has it been going on?"

"Since last year. The doctors put him to bed in early June."

There wasn't anything more to say. I heard distant music. "The kids are down in the cellar room," she said. We went down the stairs. The music was louder. One wall was filled with record albums. Laura was standing by the built-in player. She gave us a polite smile and then turned back to the album she held.

"And this is Steve, Kip," Jody said. He was flat on his back on a couch. He unfolded in slow sections and stood up. He looked about nineteen. His head almost touched the ceiling. Six-five, if an inch. And at least two-sixty, none of it fat. He was a giant. He had a sleepy, tousled, dewy look, like a kitten awakened from a nap. His big hand swallowed mine.

"Steve Tarpin, Kip Merrit," Jody said.

"That name rings some bells," I said, trying to get my hand loose. "Western Conference last fall?"

He yawned like a lion. "Uh-huh," he said. He yawned again and sagged back wearily onto the couch. "Live just down the road."

"When're you going into pro ball?"

"Did. Starts in the fall." He sighed and shut his eyes.

"Come on, Kip. I'll show you the grounds," Jody said.

We went out. Behind the house the lawns sloped down toward the small stream I had seen from my window. A burly old man was on his hands and knees grubbing around in a flower bed. He didn't look up, and Jody seemed to accept him as part of the scenery.

"Lots of land," I said.

"Six acres. We go over to that fence on the hill beyond the stream. You can just see it from here."

"Laura has herself a large chunk of man there."

"Large and dull."

She pulled open the screen door of the garden house. She went over to a locked cabinet in the corner and took the key out of the pocket of her dark blue skirt. When she swung the doors back I saw that it was a nicely stocked little bar, complete even to the ice trays.

"Still on rye, Kip?" she asked.

"On the rocks."

She made herself a highball, brought me my drink. We sat on either side of a small table. I lit a cigarette.

"We can talk here, Kip. You're wondering why I sent for you."

"And wondering why I came."

She looked through me and beyond me. She barely moved her lips as she said, "There was no one else to ask, Kip. No one in the world."

"Pore friendless little old gal."

"Don't be snooty, Kip."

"Why shouldn't I be? Answer me that. Why shouldn't I be? Did any other two people ever have a month like we had in Los Angeles? It was going to be for keeps. We were going to get married as soon as I got back. I was even sending you the dough to keep you going. Next I know you marry some guy from your home town almost fifty."

HER knuckles were white where she held the edge of the table. She looked down as she talked. "It's one of those things you can't explain, Kip. I was young, and I was green. I came from the wrong side of the tracks in this town. You knew that. There was a chance for the security I'd never had. I didn't know how long you'd be overseas. Maybe it would be years."

"I was ordered back forty-one days after I got that letter."

"Oh, Kip, I'm so sorry. Good Lord, the mistakes people make! And life doesn't seem to want to give you second chances, does it Kip?" She brought her eyes slowly up to meet mine, staring at me through the smoky lashes. "Does it, Kip?"

"We aren't going to talk that way. Not with that guy in the house in that bed looking the way he does. We aren't going to talk that way, Jody."

"He's sweet, Kip. I thought I wanted security. Kip, it isn't enough. It hasn't been enough."

"Did I come out here just to be a wailing wall?"

"You didn't used to be hard that way, Kip. You've changed . . . so much."

"Jody, you'd better tell me the trouble."

"It's very simple, Kip. Somebody tried to kill me."

I took a long pull at my drink. It bit on the way down. "Interesting, if true."

"You see, I couldn't bring in the local police without Roger finding out why. And in his condition, he couldn't stand that sort of a strain. The least I owe him is to have things—peaceful for him."

"How did it happen?"

"I came in late just ten days ago. I parked the car, and it seemed to be such a nice night that I decided to walk down here to the river. I was wearing a shoulder bag with a fairly short strap over my left shoulder. As I went by that row of bushes up there, there was a funny chunking sound, and the most tremendous blow against my left side. It knocked me absolutely flat and drove all the breath out of me. As I lay there, I heard something crash in the brush, and then steps like somebody running. I got up finally and went back up to the house. There was a hole in my shoulderbag, and this is what I found."

She took two objects out of her pocket, and after a careful glance up toward the house, she put them on the table. The first object was a flat silver cigarette lighter that looked as though it had been smacked with a hammer. The second object was a lead bullet so flattened that the comparison microscope would find nothing to go on.

"You can still see the mark," she said. She pulled the light blue shirt out of the blue skirt and hitched it up a little on the left side. Under the left arm was the fading yellow-purple of an old bruise a bit larger in diameter than the lighter. She hastily tucked the shirt back into her skirt.

She said, "I kept thinking about it. I couldn't sleep, of course. At three in the morning, I wrote that letter to you, hoping that it wouldn't have to be forwarded too many times. With you having been in CIC in the army, and the way you talked about opening some sort of an agency after the war—"

"I opened it, with a partner. We specialized in insurance stuff. When I got your letter, I sold out to him. I'd been waiting for an excuse. The business was beginning to bore me."

"By the car you drive and the clothes you wear, Kip, you must have done well."

"We had some decent recoveries. They pay off. But I haven't had this sort of a case, ever. I'm not trained for it. Have you tried to think it out?"

She rested her chin on her clenched fist and frowned. It was a gesture I remembered. "Naturally, Kip, I started thinking about motive. The best motive, I guess, is money. Roger's will splits his money and property evenly between Laura and me, plus, of course, the usual small bequests here and there."

"Is there much?"

"It all comes to about six million, Kip, but a great deal of it is in property that would be difficult to liquidate fast."

I whistled softly. A greedy little beast sitting in the back of my mind advised me to stick around, keep the girl alive and marry three million dollars. But I didn't like what that made me. There are words for that sort of thing. Hard words.

"So that makes Laura your suspect, eh?"

"Yes, and of course that's perfectly absurd, Kip. She's an odd girl. Very re-

served. You know, I've never been able to find out whether she likes me or dislikes me. Laura keeps herself to herself. But she's always had everything. People who have always had everything don't have that tremendous drive to get more and more."

"That doesn't always follow. Is the place guarded at all?"

"There's a sort of community watchman who roams over the whole neighborhood."

"How many people sleep in the house?"

"Just the five of us. Roger, Laura and I, plus Marta and Anna Lipcheck."

"How about the gardener?"

"He takes care of the Sherman place, too. He lives over their garage. His name is Stofler."

"How dark a night was it?"

"Just a fingernail moon. Not really bright at all."

"Then you could have looked like any woman. Lipcheck or Laura or Marta. I think this slug was from a thirty-two, with a silencer. It was a good shot. If you used matches instead of a lighter, you'd be dead."

She shivered. "I don't want to be dead, Kip. I've got a lot of living to do yet. An awful lot. Keep me alive, Kip. Please keep me alive."

I walked over and made two more drinks. I brought hers to her. "What's it worth to you for me to keep you alive, Jody."

"How can you say that?"

"I don't work for love. Seven years ago I would have. But not now."

"Don't I mean anything to you?"

"Yes, my darling. Ten thousand dollars, payable when the job is over."

"I suppose you want a written contract," she said with icy calm.

"That won't be necessary."

"Let's not quarrel, Kip."

"How long will he live, in there?"

"The doctors wouldn't tell me. Miss Lipcheck hinted, though. Not over another month, and it might be a great deal less."

"You realize, of course, that whoever took the shot at you is going to be pretty dubious about this cousin angle?"

"Do you have a gun?"

"No. I'm not licensed in this state. I don't want a gun. People who carry guns shoot people sometimes. It can be very embarrassing."

"Don't make jokes about it, Kip."

"All right. No jokes. Keep your door locked. Keep away from windows at night. Don't go for strolls alone."

CHAPTER TWO

On the Sly

DINNER was served in a small, pleasant paneled room, served by Marta, a lead-footed woman with a doughy face and blueberry eyes and mouse hair pulled back so smooth and tight that it seemed to flatten her cheeks. As there were four of us at a table for six, we didn't use the ends. Laura was beside me, Jody across from me.

Conversation was pretty erratic. Jody and I threw the ball back and forth with an infrequent comment by Laura, no comment at all from the massive Steve Tarpin. He ate with steady determination.

At last he set his coffee cup down and said to Laura, "Ready, kid?"

"We're driving to town, Jody," Laura said.

Off they went and left us with seconds on the coffee. Jody looked at her watch. "I sit with him while Miss Lipcheck eats, Kip. You'll have to amuse yourself."

I remained at the table. Miss Lipcheck came down and stopped abruptly in the doorway. "Come on and sit down," I said. "I'm about to go."

She ate silently. If a fox could use a knife and fork, that's the way it would eat. Hungry precision. "Tough case?" I asked casually.

She paused with the fork halfway to ripe lips. The colorless eyes flicked across my face. "No, sir."

"Better than somebody who'd want to chase you around and around the bed, I suppose."

She colored a little. I decided the hair wasn't really red. It was copper brown. "I guess so, sir."

"You like the people here?"

"My patient is Mr. Dowling, sir. He's a— a very nice man."

"But the others aren't nice?"

She put her fork and knife carefully across her plate. She patted her lips with the napkin. "Isn't it odd for a relative of Mrs. Dowling's to talk that way, sir?"

"I'm an odd relative, Anna."

Marta trudged in with Miss Lipcheck's coffee. After she had gone, Anna said, in a husky whisper. "That gag has me laughing myself to death, mister."

"Maybe we better go where we can talk, Anna."

"She sits with him from ten to twelve every night."

"By the garden house?" I asked.

"A little after ten." She gulped the coffee and went back upstairs. I was in the library when Jody came back down.

She came to me and leaned her forehead against my shoulder. "I've always hated sickness, Kip. I have to smile at him. It makes me all crawly. I don't know how much more I can take."

"Didn't I see a pool table down in the cellar? Shoot you a game."

We didn't talk. The balls clacked sharply. She was good at it. Sometimes she brushed against me as we moved around the table. We played straight pool. I was only five up on her when she had to go up to relieve Lipcheck. We left the table as is, her shot, with the fourteen ball quiv-

ering on the lip of the corner pocket.

Lipcheck was a pale blotch moving down across the lawn. When she came closer, I could see the white cotton stockings scissoring toward me. Then I could hear the starchy rustle. She stopped close enough to me so that I could smell her. No perfume. Clean soap, clean shampoo.

"Now you don't have to be so cryptic," I said.

"The door's never locked. Let's get inside. Mosquitoes come off the marsh at night. It isn't far. You listen, you can hear the peepers over there."

I held the door for her. She wore rubber soles. She drifted across the room without a sound, sat down with a sigh on a bench built in along one wall. I gave her a cigarette. When I struck the light, she was looking up at me, leaving it up to me to find the end of the cigarette.

"Some things I like," she said. "Other things I don't much go for."

"I don't remember ever hearing any broader statements, Anna."

"Don't be so wise. We lived on the east end of town. A hell of a neighborhood.

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They called us Hunkies. Dad slung sacks in the feed mill. Seven kids. We kept clean. No dirt in our house. But being Hunkies, and with the accents Mom and Dad had, there wasn't much of anything for us to look down on. Nothing but the Ames clan. Jody Ames and that slack-mouthed brother of hers and her drunken old man and her dirty old lady."

I sat down beside her. "A light begins to glimmer."

"Oh, she doesn't know it yet. Lipcheck is my married name. She never has recognized me. She looked at me sort of funny in the beginning, but I played dumb. I changed a lot when I grew up. We were never friends. She was two grades behind me in school.

"My husband is dead. I call myself Miss, but I use his name. That Jody. She was a no-good kid. Her whole family was no good, mister. Alcohol killed the old man. The brother was killed in a smash-up. Jody and her old lady left town. Later somebody heard the old lady died. Then I come here, and I find Jody Ames, and I've got to say, 'Yes, Mrs. Dowling. No, Mrs. Dowling.'" Anna Lipcheck made a rude sound with her lips.

"So?"

"So I know you can't be any cousin. If she had any cousins, they wouldn't be wearing shoes. You asked me, I'm telling you. You can get me fired, I suppose. But it would be tough to find another nurse to take care of him. He's too far gone. I'd just hate to have him find out in any way that she's brought a boy friend here to live on his money until he kicks off."

We sat in silence. Jody had told me very little about her family. Just that they were dead, and they had been poor when she was a kid. This was a new side to Jody. I couldn't help respecting her for the progress she'd made. And also for the way she had fitted herself into a house with this much luxury.

"You've been frank with me, Anna. I'll be frank with you. I'm here as a bodyguard to Mrs. Dowling. Somebody came very damn close to killing her. It made her nervous, so she sent for me. I'm—an old friend."

Her silence lasted a long time. "Maybe I owe you an apology, Mr. Merrit."

"Then you aren't laughing at the idea

of somebody trying to kill Jody Ames?"

"This—this is a funny house, you know. You feel things going on under the surface. That Laura, moving around like a ghost. That great big guy that's here all the time. Laura hates Jody. You know why? She can't help thinking that Jody revved the old man up so high that he got sick. That's silly. That isn't the way you go about getting yourself a carcinoma. She did lead him a merry chase for a few years, though. Jody's a great one for fun and games."

"Where does Steve fit?"

"In love with Laura. She ignores him half the time. He doesn't seem to mind. He can go to sleep anywhere he sits down."

"Just a growing boy," I said. She didn't answer. She stepped on her cigarette.

"He lives right down the road, he said," I asked.

"He does. His father is gardener for the Pell family, and his ma does the cooking."

"If Jody has a bunch of social ambitions, I'd think she'd chase him out."

"She tried to. Now they seldom speak. Laura put her foot down. She said that, if Steve couldn't come to the house, she was leaving. She told her father. It made a big stink. Mr. Dowling called Jody in and gave her a scolding. Sick as he is, he can still handle his wife and his daughter."

"Where does his money come from?"

"He inherited a good chunk and built it up. Land, mostly. Farm mortgages, piece of the Paynesburg National Bank."

"The will splits things between Jody and Laura, eh?"

"I wouldn't know about that. I know I'm in it for a little. He told me so. Look, who tried to kill her?"

"She doesn't know. Somebody shot at her and hit her pocketbook instead."

"So that's it!" Anna said. "I wondered about that. I found a pocketbook in the rubbish. A shoulder bag. I remembered it was her new one. It had a hole in it, and it was ruined. I didn't think of a bullet. Why didn't it come out the other side?"

"Hit her cigarette lighter."

"Too bad she smokes," Anna said somberly.

"You know of any guns in the house?"

"No."

"If I wanted to look around, what would be a good time?"

She thought it over. "Tomorrow afternoon. Marta takes that afternoon off. I heard Laura say something about going riding, with Steve. Jody had a bridge date at the club. That is, unless she breaks it on account of having you as a guest."

"I'll see that she doesn't."

"I've got a letter to write, Mr. Merrit. I better get back to my room."

She stood up. I walked to the door with her. "Thanks, Anna," I said.

"Don't mention it."

SECONDS later she was a moving blur headed up the dark lawn. I sat for a time. It was close to eleven. The miniature river made a whispering sound against the shore. A mosquito whined around my ears. A car pulled into the drive, and the lights struck the brush. A car door chunked, and the car drove away. Soon I saw another figure coming down toward the garden house. My private little Grand Central Terminal. I had no cigarette lit, and I was sitting where the shadows were deep. I saw that it was Laura, walking slowly, scuffing at the grass, her hands shoved into the pockets of a short coat with a flared skirt.

As she pushed the door open, I said, softly, "Hi, there."

She gasped and found the light switch. I squinted into the brightness. Her lips had a bruised look, and her hair was disordered. "Oh, it's you." She turned the lights out and started to move away.

"Don't be so cordial," I said. "Maybe I'm lonesome."

She stood, holding the door. "I doubt that."

"Come on in, Laura. I'm a very harmless citizen."

She shrugged, silhouetted against the night, and came in, letting the door bang behind her. She sat over at the small table. "Nice place you have here," I said.

"Don't feel you have to make conversation." Her tone was flat and dead.

"What's chewing on you, Laura. You look like you ought to be a happier kid."

"Me? I'm gay as a little dickie bird. And don't pry. Hear me? Don't pry!" That much emphasis was hardly necessary.

She got up, kicking the chair back, and slammed the door again as she went out. There was a girl, I knew, on the ragged edge of something. Something destructive.

A little after midnight I went up to the house. Jody was standing alone by the fireplace drinking brandy out of a bell glass. The bottle and another glass were on the tray.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

"Letting my soul beat its wild wings under the night sky." I helped myself.

"I get irritable after my nightly vigil, Kip. I've been thinking about brandy for the last hour."

I stood close to her. "What's chewing on Laura?"

"Maybe her love life," she said carelessly. "Who cares?"

"Can she keep that hulk awake long enough to have a love life?"

"Mystery to me, too."

"Now all we do is stand around and wait, eh?"

She looked at me soberly. "Kip, I wish I could tell you how much better I feel, just having you here. Someone I can lean on, depend on."

"Sturdy old Merrit, the housewife's friend."

"You're still mad at me, aren't you?"

"I don't know."

She moved closer to me. Her eyes were feral, her mouth like a wound. "Aren't you?" she said, so softly that I got the meaning from the shape of her lips rather than the sound.

At noon the next day I convinced Jody that I could keep myself amused. Laura and Steve were already gone. Marta took a tray up to Anna Lipcheck, put my lunch on a terrace table in the warm sun and departed. After I ate, I carried the tray in out of the sunshine. The house seemed very silent. I went out into the wing where Anna kept her vigil. The door was open. Anna was not in her chair by the bed. Roger Dowling was staring at me with those deep, glowing eyes, as though he had been watching the door, knowing somehow that I would appear.

"Come in," he rumbled.

I went in and stood by the bed. "How are you feeling to—"

He shut me up with a slow lift of his hand. He closed his eyes, opened them slowly. "Why—are you here, Mr. Merrit?"

"I'm Jody's cousin and—"

"Please. I am not such a fool, Mr. Mer-

rit. Before I married Jody, I had her investigated by a very competent firm. The report was six pages, single-spaced. Knowing what she was and what she had been, I married her gladly, though she doesn't know that. I remembered your name yesterday. You were the officer she was with in Los Angeles, not a cousin."

There was no point in denying it. In fact it would have been very difficult to deny it with those eyes watching me. "That's right."

"What are you doing here?"

"I won't tell you exactly, Mr. Dowling. I'll tell you just one thing. I'm not here as any part of an affair with your wife. Please believe me."

The eyes looked into mine. The weak smile was long in coming. "I believe you. And—help Jody, if you can, sir. I don't know why, but I think she needs help."

Anna came through the door from the bathroom. She stared at me and came quickly to his side, took his pulse. Her lips were compressed. "Please go, sir," she told me.

I glanced back, and I could have sworn that he winked at me as I went out the door. Roger C. Dowling was nobody's fool. In fifteen minutes Anna came out. She said, "He's asleep now. If you want to look around—"

"Keep an eye on the drive if you can, Anna. Let me know."

FIRST I went to Laura's room. I slid the big mirror plate doors of her closet back, releasing the scent of her clothes. Top shelves of closets are always good. Hers were stacked with hat boxes. I took the lower ones first. Nothing. The built-in bureau was packed with intimacies made of gossamer and cobwebs. Nothing. I didn't know what I was looking for. Some clue to the girl's tremendous reserve.

Having to replace things as found slowed the process somewhat. I stood in the middle of the room, scratching the back of my head with my knuckles. There were books lined up on a low shelf by the window. One of the books was a photograph album. I sat on the window-seat with it in my lap. One of the first pictures was of Laura, naked as a jay bird, stretched out on a blanket. The only trouble was that she had three fingers in her mouth and was probably

not very much older than eleven months.

History of Laura. Laura at five or six with her parents on the boat deck of a liner. Laura at eight on a stretch of white beach. A gangly Laura of twelve, diving into a pool. Laura in this school and that. Laura growing into loveliness.

I sat for a long time staring at the last picture in the book. The book was only half filled, but it was the last picture. Laura standing looking into the eyes of a dark, trim-looking kid. A kid with shoulders and a good jaw. He was holding her hand. An elderly man was beaming at them. Misty in the background loomed the bulk called Steve Tarpin, looking as usual, half asleep. It was a professional picture, with a glossy finish. I held it in the light and stared hard at the hand the guy was holding. The left hand. I put the book back and did some looking that had more point to it. No result. I left her room and went to where I could look in on Anna. The patient was asleep. I beckoned to her, and she came out.

"Anna," I whispered, "does Laura drive into town quite a bit?"

"Every day. She never misses."

"By any chance would she always be taking letters in to mail? Have you noticed?"

"No," she said dubiously, "but she's got a portable typewriter. She uses it a lot late at night. I guess she must be writing letters. What's this all about?"

"I'm driving into town for awhile."

I went into town. It took plenty of digging and some small expenditures of funds before I found out that: (1) Miss Dowling maintained a post office box. (2) Miss Dowling very probably maintained a safety deposit box. I drove back out with a good idea of what was chewing on our Laura Dowling, but with no idea of how it might fit into the general picture. In the past I have had hunches of impending violence. Something in the air. Like a vibration, a tautness.

Jody was back. She had changed to shorts and a halter, and she was catching some of the late afternoon sun on the terrace. She had a chair tipped back, her heels hooked on the edge of the table. Her legs were just a trifle heavier than seven years before. The ankles were as slim, but the calf was more rounded, the swell of thigh more pronounced. They were tanned very

faintly, and by September they would be a deep brown.

"Pull up a collins and sit down," she said. "Where have you been?"

"Sorry I left without permission."

"You don't have to be nasty."

I took off my jacket and rolled my sleeves up. As I sat down, Steve and Laura arrived, bringing with them the faint smell of horse. Laura was trim and smart in pale jodhpurs.

"Nice ride, kids?" Jody asked.

"Laura got tossed," Steve said.

Jody straightened up. "My goodness, Laura. Were you hurt?"

Laura sat down. I saw the smear of grass stain on her left shoulder and hip. "I could have been. I was lucky. There's a place beyond Millman's where you come down across the back pasture to that stone wall. Plenty of place for two horses to land beyond the wall. We were neck and neck, and then that damn brute of Steve's swerved over so that when I took the wall, I hit it where it drops off on the other side. It was a hell of a drop for Molly, and I knew she'd fall, so I got my feet out of the stirrups in midair. If I hadn't, she would have broken me in half."

Jody gave Steve a malignant stare. He smothered a yawn with his ham-like fist. "One of those things," he mumbled.

"It didn't hurt Molly a bit," Laura said. "Just dug her shoulder on a rock a little. Well, I'm off to change."

"I better go too," Steve said.

"And come back, I expect," Jody said acidly.

"He's my guest, Jody. I think you better remember that," Laura said.

That Steve, I decided, had a hide a rhino could envy. He had made one hell of a football record. The pros must have given him a nice bonus for signing. Enough, probably, to take his parents out of the servant class.

He walked sleepily off across lots. I said to Jody, "Rough on the kid, aren't you?"

"That damn vegetable. He gives me a pain."

"A nice clean-cut American boy like that?"

"Clean-cut American mammoth. I hate having him around, Kip."

"He doesn't seem to bother anybody. And there seems to be enough money

around so you can afford to feed him."

She took her feet down, reached her drink, drained it and stood up. "A change of clothes for me, too."

She went up. I went out and took a walk down the road. I found a place with the name Pell in front of it. A good-sized place. An old man, so huge that I knew who he was, was using an automatic hedge-clipper near the front of the place. I stood and watched him for a while. He didn't say a word until he had finished the section he was working on. Then he clicked off the gizmo and turned to me. "Something you want?"

"Human-interest story on Steve Tarpin. Aren't you his father?"

The old man spat with deliberation. "I could be."

"I bet you're excited about all the money your boy is going to make, huh?"

He took more time spitting. He looked at me out of hooded old eyes. "Hah!" he said.

"No more than that? Just 'Hah!'?"

"That's all Mary and me'll see of the dough, friend. Put that in your human-interest story." He walked away and left me standing there. I walked through the first blue shadows of dusk back to the Dowling place.

CHAPTER THREE

Hate's Death

THAT evening, while the four of us were at dinner, in the same places as before, we all paused when we heard someone running toward us through the house. Anna Lipcheck appeared in the doorway, her hand at her throat, her face gray.

"I'm phoning the doctor," she said, "I think it's a stroke."

In the sudden silence we could all hear the heavy, rasping, labored breathing of Roger Dowling. I looked at Jody. Instead of looking shocked, she looked fiercely angry. Laura gave a little cry and ran from the room. When we got to the doorway, Laura was kneeling beside the bed. The rasping breath came from the sagging mouth of the sick man. With each breath a vein bulged in the withered throat.

Jody backed away from the door and

turned into my arms. "I can't go in there, Kip," she said, "I can't!"

I looked across her shoulder at Steve. All sleepiness was gone. He stood poised on the balls of his feet, his face carved of stone, his eyes slitted and aware. As I looked at him, the sleepiness returned.

The doctor came in fifteen minutes, his tires yelping on the asphalt as he braked his car. He went in with Dowling and Anna and closed the door. The four of us waited in the living room. There was no thought of continuing dinner, of course. He came out after a half hour. He stood, frowning, a small man with an air of self-importance that was impressive.

"Cerebral hemorrhage," he said.

"Will he die now?" Jody asked quickly.

The doctor gave her a quick glance. "We can keep him alive with glucose, stimulants. But there will be no elimination of poisons from his system. They will kill him. He's in coma. He won't regain consciousness."

Jody's eyes filled with tears that spilled over. "Doctor Webb, please keep him alive, as—as long as you can."

"Of course," he said absently.

And that was the way the vigil for all of us started. There was no getting away from the sound of that breathing. It filled the house and, seeming to grow, began to fill the grounds around the house, threatening to fill all of the world.

It was impossible to obtain another nurse. Laura and Anna split the duties, and there wasn't much to do except wait. The doctor left and promised to return before midnight. Steve lumbered around the house like a bear looking for a cave. Even with his weight, his step was surprisingly soft.

Jody was never without a drink in her hand. And the drinks seemed to have no effect. For a long time I was alone in the living room. Then Steve came in. He stood looking into the dead fireplace. There were three parallel scratches on the side of his neck, under his right ear. I stared at them absently, with some small hidden memory nagging me. Then Jody came in, and I forgot.

Steve said, "Well, I'm going. I'll come back later maybe."

"Don't hurry," Jody said. He nodded at me and lumbered out.

Jody and I were left alone, with the

sound of the breathing. She seemed very far away. Pretty soon Laura came out, blue patches under her eyes, her mouth drawn and tired.

Jody went to her and put her hands on Laura's shoulders. "I'm truly sorry, dear," she said.

Laura forced a smile. "I know, Jody. I'm sorry I've been—unkind to you."

They kissed. "That's all forgotten," Jody murmured. "Look, dear, you need a breath of air. Why don't you take a walk in the garden?" She linked her arm in Laura's and walked her to the side door. She opened the closet and took out a long bright yellow corduroy coat. "Here, dear. Wear my coat. There's a chill in the air."

"Mine's right here, Jody. Why—no it isn't!"

"Oh, I remember. It's up in my room, dear. I borrowed it yesterday. Take this one." She slipped it over Laura's shoulders, opened the door. Laura went out. For a moment Jody's face sagged in an odd way.

Did you ever listen to a complicated lock when the key is turned. Each tumbler makes a separate click as it is released, and the last one, the one which opens the lock, makes a louder click than all the rest.

Little things clicked in my mind. Secret marriage, scratches on a bull neck, poverty, greediness, my own gullibility.

I stood up as casually as I dared and said, "I think I'll walk with her, Jody."

"She'd rather be alone, Kip."

"No, honey. She needs company."

Jody blocked the door, her eyes blazing. "I need your company, Kip."

I smiled and reached for her. As she came into my arms, I pivoted her over my hip and sat her on the hall floor with a thump. I tore the door open and ran down through the garden. Ahead of me the tall girl walked slowly. I made little noise on the grass, and I ran as hard and as fast as I could. Fifteen feet from her I tripped on a small bush. I kept going, head down, arms pinwheeling, then dived and slammed her legs out from under her, hearing as she toppled across me the guttural chunk of a silenced shot, the whiss of lead cutting the night air.

I GOT my knees under me as she started to sit up. I hit her flush on the jaw with a punch that didn't travel over six

inches. Her teeth clicked shut, and she dropped back onto the grass. I ran for the dark line of brush, crouched low, angling back and forth. There was a crashing in the brush ahead of me, and I put on speed, but the vague shape was more fleet than I. The garden house was an oblong shadow off to my right, the miniature river dead ahead.

There was a distant wet sound that I couldn't identify, and suddenly I was hit hard. Fists and elbows and knees, all like boulders, smacked me from throat to thighs. It was like catching a barrel of bricks dropped off a roof. I flew back into heavy brush, gagging for breath, and a figure towered over me, blotting out half the sky. I rolled up onto my shoulders and let fly with both heels. They hit something satisfyingly soft, and, as it staggered back, I got up onto my feet. I got up with a rock in my hand.

It drove at me again, and the shoulder drove into my middle, bearing me back. I swung the rock the first time. The dark fist slammed me over the ear, and comets circled the night sky. I swung the rock again. A fist pawed softly at my mouth. I swung the rock the third time. The dark figure folded down onto me with a mild sigh, its cheek against mine. I raised my rock high and brought it down against the back of its head. I lay still for some time, then wiggled out from under it. I found a match and stared at Steve's battered face. He looked very normal, sleeping peacefully.

Jody was standing by Laura, grinding her hands together. "Is she—"

I realized that I still held the rock in my hand. I wanted to use it to smash Jody's face. It made a thud when I dropped it onto the grass.

"Yes, she's dead," I said softly. "Some man shot her. I knocked him out with a rock down in the brush. I'm going to call the police and then go back with a light and take a look at him and see who he is."

I bent and picked Laura up in my arms.

Jody said thinly, "Somebody thought it was me, Kip. She was wearing my coat."

I carried Laura into the house. I took her back to her room, and I put her on the bed. The bruise on her jaw was already darkening. She moaned, and I clapped a

hand over her mouth. Her eyes opened wide, and vacant. Comprehension came back into them. Comprehension and anger.

I said, "Talk in a whisper, Laura." I took my hand from her mouth.

"What's happening? Why did you—"

"Laura, something bad is going on. Something very bad. Jody thinks you're dead. I want her to keep on thinking so. Stay in this room and be quiet. I'm going to lock the door on the outside. Promise me?"

"I want to be with Dad."

"You'll be with him where he's going if you don't do as I say. Don't do it for me. Do it for your husband."

She jumped. "What are you—"

"Don't kid me, Laura. I know. Where is he? In the service somewhere?"

"Marine fighter pilot," she said woodenly. "We were married secretly. Dad was too sick to—"

"But Steve was there, wasn't he?"

"Yes, and Steve has been so sweet to me and so understanding."

"Now I'm locking you in and reporting your murder, Laura. Please, please trust me."

As I stood waiting for her answer, we heard the stentorian breathing, that had filled the house, stop. The silence was that of a tomb. Then the breathing started again, faltered, stopped. Long seconds passed. It did not begin again. Nothing could have been more clear. She turned her face to the wall and began to cry silently. I touched her shoulder, then tiptoed out and locked the door behind me. I phoned the Paynesburg police and reported a murder.

Murder at the Dowling home brought out the Chief. Jody, somehow, had found time to change to a black dress. She had removed all makeup. I had never noticed before how thin her lips were.

As I led the Chief and a group of impressed, tiptoeing minions back to Laura's room, the Chief said, "I hope you realize, Merrit, that moving a body is a serious business."

"I know," I said. I unlocked the door. The corpse was sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Listen here," the Chief said angrily, "just what kind of a darn fool—"

"Shush!" I said. "Get in here, all of you." They came in, red-faced with annoyance.

I said, "This was the spur of the moment thing. Mrs. Dowling and Steve Tarpin tried to kill this girl. The men you sent after Steve will lug him up here. Then we get the two of them together.

"If they think they succeeded, my guess is that they'll say something Laura here can refute, and then you can charge them with attempted murder, at least. You see, they had to get Laura out of the way before the old man died, otherwise Laura's husband—she's secretly married—would get her half of the estate. They think she died before Roger Dowling. That means Jody Dowling thinks right now that she gets it all."

Laura covered her face with her hands. "No, no," she said.

There was a knock at the door. The Chief opened it a cautious crack, then swung it wide and let a man with a bloodhound's sagging face in. "We found Tarpin, Chief. Only not the way this fella said. We found him real dead, with his head beat in good."

They were all staring at me. My mind had stopped functioning completely. Jody had started dealing from the bottom of a brand new deck. The Chief made a wild grab but missed Laura as she fainted.

I said quickly, "I made a bad mistake. I should have guessed Jody would see that perfect out. She went back and did it. I only knocked him out."

The Chief glared at me. "A nice little woman like that Mrs. Dowling. You must be nuts. I'm charging you with murder, my friend. Just who the hell are you?"

"Will you play along with me for a half hour or so? What have you got to lose?"

WE WERE in the living room. All the animosity was directed at me. Both bodies had been taken away. Steve's and Roger Dowling's. Jody looked shrunken and small and white.

I said, "I'll make it brief. I'm not proud of it. I was the patsy. Steve, the child of servants, and Jody, from the wrong end of town, made a pact. Get rid of Laura and take over all the old man's dough. Trouble was, there wasn't any impartial witness around. Everybody had something at stake. Jody thought of me. She knew I'd come a-running. So they faked an attempt at Jody's life."

I showed them the lighter and the slug, retold Jody's story, and then said, "Of course, the slug didn't hit the shoulder-bag while Jody was behind it. They probably laid it flat on the ground, and then Steve knuckled her hard in the right spot to make a convincing bruise."

Jody laughed flatly, without humor. Everybody glared at me.

"Laura was secretly married. Only Steve was supposed to know that. Steve, to cover himself, made it look as though he were her boy friend. Jody played along with the gag by ordering Steve out of the house, knowing that Laura would fight it—and win."

"Laura told me she was married," Jody said.

"The murder was to look like mistaken identity. That's why Laura was sent out wearing Jody's yellow coat," I said. "Steve was waiting out there in the brush to gun her down. Jody and Steve had been very discreet, but not discreet enough. I remembered in time why parallel scratches on his neck looked familiar. Jody used to put those same marks on me in Los Angeles seven years ago. When I remembered, things began to add up fast. If they hadn't added up, it's a good bet that Jody would be marrying Steve sometime next year."

"How quaint!" Jody said.

"When Laura went out, I ran after her. I got to her too late. I chased Steve down to the river and knocked him out. When I came back to call, Jody went down and beat his skull in. Now she doesn't have to share with anybody. Laura died before her father did. Steve is dead. Jody has six million dollars, which is just the way she wanted it."

Jody smiled. She said to the Chief, "May I be permitted to tell my side of it, or are you going to send me to the electric chair immediately?"

"Please tell us what happened, Mrs. Dowling," the Chief said, glaring over at me.

"This is horrible—for me to have to have all this happen the night my husband dies," she said in a small voice. "I'm sure I don't know what Mr. Merrit is talking about. That is my lighter, but I don't know what happened to it. I used to know Mr. Merrit, a long time ago. He found me

a few days ago and forced his way in here. Because of my husband's illness, I couldn't make a scene. I pretended he was my cousin. The nurse can back me up on that.

"When I convinced him that I was no longer interested in him in any way, he started to force his attentions on Laura. He seemed quite taken with her. Steve was angry about it, but I refused to let Steve throw him out. I decided Laura could handle it in her own way. She told me she could.

"All today he has been acting strange and—irrational. Even after my husband's stroke, he still kept after Laura. When he followed her out of the house, I grew worried. I went out and watched. I saw them argue. Then I saw a gleaming thing in his hand. There was a funny noise. Laura fell. He ran down toward the river. I ran after him and saw Steve run over and cut him off, just as Mr. Merrit threw something into the river. It was probably the gun and you'll probably find it there.

"Steve and Mr. Merrit fought, and I was afraid to go any closer. Finally one

of them stood up. I could see in the moonlight that it was Mr. Merrit. He came up to me with a bloodstained rock in his hand. I was too frightened to speak or move. Then he dropped the rock and picked up Laura's body and—and carried her into the house."

She settled back and looked around confidently. Then she said, in a small voice, "Why is everyone looking at me that way?"

I couldn't help admiring her. I had been a good little boy and destroyed the letter she sent me, as per instructions in the letter. If I had reached Laura one full second later, Danny Deever Merrit would be hanging in the morning.

"In the moonlight," the Chief said, "you could see the rock was bloodstained?"

His manner toward her had changed in a way that was not entirely subtle. Her hand clamped the arm of the chair and her eyes flicked across our faces. "I—I'm pretty certain I could."

"And this man killed your step-daughter in a jealous frenzy because she wouldn't accept his attentions?"



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She looked at me clinically. "I think Mr. Merrit is quite mad."

The Chief gave an abrupt nod to the man with the bloodhound face. The man walked out of the room.

The Chief said, "It's a shame that your step-daughter isn't around to back up your story, Mrs. Dowling."

"Laura and I were very close. I'll never forgive myself for not having Steve throw Mr. Merrit out when he first appeared here." She frowned. "And why should my story need backing up? Certainly, that insane yarn he told you—"

Laura walked into the room and said, "Jody, they told me you—"

It wasn't pretty. Probably it never is. Jody's small face under the heavy black bangs fell apart. The flat, animal lines of the insane appeared. And she began to scream. She slammed her heels on the floor and arched her body upward, out of the chair, screaming. She flung herself against the arm, and the chair went over with her, and she clawed the rug, drumming with her feet as she screamed.

After they took her away, it was largely a matter of cleaning up the details. They took Anna Lipcheck's testimony about the bag. The Chief wondered why it wasn't used as a prop, and then when Anna described it in more detail, it was easy to see that the powder burns around the hole made it useless. The clothes that Jody had been wearing before she changed to black were found wadded in the bottom of a hamper, the telltale spatter of blood and tissue near the hem. When Laura collapsed, the doctor came back and gave her a shot, told Miss Lipcheck it wouldn't hurt to stay around another day or two.

At three in the morning Anna Lipcheck and I sat at the kitchen table, coffee bubbling peacefully on the big gas range. She ran her fingers back through the dark red

hair at her temples and rested her elbows on the table. The house was as still as only a midwest three a.m. can be. Miss Lipcheck was still in white, but not as starched as before.

"You've got to stay around, eh?" she asked.

I nodded. "Witness for the prosecution. I know Jody. A lot of that was an act. Temporary insanity, she'll plead. And I want premeditation to stick."

She closed her eyes. "Me, I've had enough. More than enough. It's taken me long enough. I'm leaving this town for good, as soon as the shouting's over."

"She's haunted me for seven years, and now the ghost is dead," I said.

She got up wearily, brought the coffee over. "Where'll you go?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I've come this far. Might as well drive on out to the Coast. There's some ghosts out there, too."

She filled my cup. "Get out of this white," she said, "and I look like anybody."

I leaned back and stared up at her until she flushed. I wonder why I had thought her eyes colorless. "Not like anybody," I said. "A lot better than most."

"Always wanted a look at those cable cars," she said.

And that's how it was. That's how, two months later, Anna got her check in the mail from the estate. Five thousand dollars, twice as much as she had expected. There were only two letters in our mail that July morning in San Francisco. The other one was for me. It was a check for ten thousand. From Laura Dowling O'Neill. There was a picture with it. I flipped it across the breakfast table to Anna. It was of Laura standing beside a good-looking kid with a good jaw and a grin. One arm was in a sling, and the other was around Laura. She was smiling right into the camera.

THE END

AT ODDS

A Montgomery, Ala., man was arrested because, when he became dissatisfied with the performance of his new auto, he ran it through the plate glass window of the company from whom he'd bought the car.

* * *

A man was fined \$100 by a Hartford, Conn., judge for poking another man too hard in the chest with a forefinger to emphasize a point at dispute.

THRILL

DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE

DOCKET



Jay Danvers was a private detective who believed in life—and death—insurance. So he wrote out—well in advance—the story of how he came to die.



It began with a redhead who looked like an angel and behaved like a demon—daughter of the straightest, and most doting, man in town . . . the governor's special crime prosecutor.



The tale took an interesting twist when Danvers became secret witness to a murder, helpless to stop the slaying, the disposal of the corpse—or the killer's getaway.



A grisly climax came when Danvers found himself buying one corpse for the price of two . . . in Fred'k C. Davis' "Death, My Darling Daughter"—in the next issue, out August 3rd.

WINE, WOMEN AND CORPSES

CHAPTER ONE

Beers and Biers

I BROUGHT my maroon convertible to a stop, and Terrie and I waited for the light. The night was hot and sticky, and only heavy business could have torn me away from my scotch mists at the *Purple Eagle's* air-conditioned bar. That, or Terrie Walker. She was the kind of gal who could make any evening a memorable one on your calendar, and it was part of my everyday wishful thinking to get her to become more than my secretary. Her voice, on the phone, had been worth a double kick:

"Mr. Rawson, do you want to make five thousand dollars tonight?"

She wasn't kidding. Even now, there was more emotion in her lovely face than I had ever seen her display.

"You have to pick up this Regan girl at the Surf Club. You get one thousand dollars if you date her tonight. Four thousand more if you take her to your apartment." Terrie's cool blue eyes asked me if I thought I could do it, but all she said was, "The light has changed, Mr. Rawson."

The "Mr. Rawson" was too formal for the kind of private detective agency I ran, and sometimes I wondered if this secretary of mine was being sarcastic. Terrie wasn't the easiest kid in the world to figure.

We drove in silence until I asked, "And who's tossing around all this lettuce?"

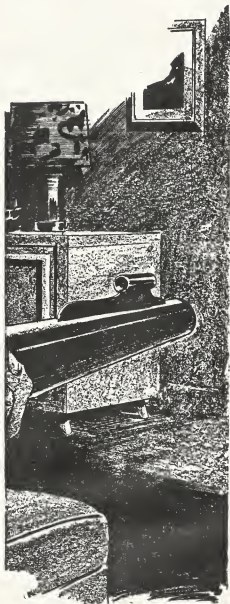
"She gave me the name Nevel Nason—a and a thousand dollars for a retaining fee."

"Cash?"

Terrie nodded. "In the office safe, Mr. Rawson. This brunette target of your winning wiles—a Clarissa Regan—is a taxi dancer at the Surf."

I tried a cigarette.

Terrie said, "You passed a light, Mr. Rawson. The policeman is blowing his whistle at you."



*Private-eye Rawson and the gorgeous singer
had a past in common—
and a future together . . .
in death.*

**Thrill-a-Minute
Novelette
of Crime**



Both of my bulldogged .44's
were in my hands.

By
HANK NAPHEYS



"Let him mail me a letter."

I took it away from there with a rush that tossed Terrie back on the seat.

"Tell me about this Nevel Nason," I said.

"She's a lovely little blonde, Mr. Rawson. Her eyes are a sort of green, and sometimes they looked yellow. They completely convinced me that there was nothing wrong in your taking this assignment tonight. The thousand dollars was convincing, too."

I had to agree with that. "When will I meet this Nevel Nason?"

"At a quarter to three in the morning," said Terrie, "at your apartment. The four thousand dollars will be there, too—if you bring along the taxi dancer."

"Sounds zany to me."

Terrie leaned forward and pointed to a bright orange-and-blue neon sign two blocks ahead. "There's the Surf."

The Surf was a joint. I'd heard of it. Why the police didn't close it up was a mystery to a lot of people, including me. Above the entrance was a fifteen-foot lighted sign of a babe in a Bikini swim suit, and the big word: *GIRLS*.

I pulled up a few doors away, looked the place over. The neon sign was bright but a long marquee above the entrance shaded the doorway. It was a dark, discreet entrance for guys who wanted to slink in nonchalantly.

The long marquee also shaded the mouth of an alley some twenty feet from the dance-hall entrance. Traffic on Tenth Avenue flicked by as I stared at the alley mouth. It was a handy exit for drunks who had gotten too athletic with the dancing hostesses in the Surf.

I looked at Terrie, spread my hands in resignation. "You, Nevel Nason and my natural curiosity win." I got out and closed the door. "I'll use cabs later. You take the car."

Terrie smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Rawson." Then she added, "I'll be home till twelve tonight, if you want to call me on the case."

I resisted the impulse to ask her what she was doing after twelve. I walked under the marquee and into the dimly lighted entrance of the Surf. Upstairs, a tough little hat-check girl looked vastly annoyed because I was bareheaded. Blaring, brassy music

from the dance floor blasted out into the lobby as I bought a yard of tickets.

A big, slap-happy bouncer in a shiny, greenish-black suit opened a gate for me. He looked dumb but he knew his business. My tailor—well, he's fired as of this minute. For this bouncer was wise to the bulge under each of my armpits. The bouncer looked unhappy but said nothing. I walked through the gate.

The dance-hall was long and narrow. The ceiling was low, painted a deep sky-blue with small star-shaped electric bulbs giving off dim light. The walls were painted to resemble a beach with colored umbrellas. The breaking surf in the background looked like stale gingerale. The joint was not air-conditioned. It looked, smelled and was as hot as any shorepoint wiggle-wrassler.

The orchestra was on a raised platform, ringed with beach ropes, at one end of the narrow dance floor. Some piece of music, which I couldn't identify, was being mauled by six sweating musicians. Tobacco smoke lay heavily on the air. Girls in skin-tight evening gowns were the dancing hostesses. They stood at the rail waiting for partners. One of these mascaraed mademoiselles was a redhead who was not badly put together at all. I gave her my tickets.

She folded the strip and tucked it in her strapless gown, though I could have sworn there wasn't room for another item. She walked into my arms, draped herself, raised her head and smiled.

I edged her into the writhing mass on the dance floor. About all we could do was stand and sway. And talk.

"You don't look like a misunderstood husband," she said. "And you're too handsome to come in here for a pickup. . . ."

I said, "Let me listen to the music, Red." She snuggled again.

I said, "It's too hot, Red."

"Mister," she said slowly, "if I'm boring you, I'll give you back half your tickets."

I patted her shoulder. "Maybe you can help me, Red. I'm looking for a friend. Her name is Clarissa Regan. Know her?"

The redhead moved to a strictly formal dancing distance. "Yeah, the Duchess is here, but she's not on the floor right now." The music stopped. "You still have tickets for half of the next number."

"Keep 'em, Red. If you see—the Duchess—send her over to me."

I downed two beers, took the third over to the rail. I was watching the orchestra, determined to decipher the piece they were playing. It was tough detecting, with the minimum of clues they were handing out, and I'd gotten exactly nowhere with it, when I sensed someone beside me. The distinctive perfume should have been a tipoff. I wasn't quite prepared for what I saw. My first impression was that of a wavering flame. The flame effect was caused by the brunette's clinging red gown. The wavering effect was caused by what was inside the red gown.

SHE pursed her lips and casually looked me over. Her big blue eyes would have been starry, except for the twin pinpoints of steel deep in the irises.

"Are you the friend who's looking for me?" she asked.

"Miss Regan?" I said.

Her eyes seemed to be photographing my face from all angles, then checking the prints against others in her memory file. "If I agree that we're old friends," she murmured, "then what?"

"We sit down," I suggested. "I'll tell you all about how I'm going to earn the pleasantest thousand bucks in my life."

She spoke carefully and distinctly. "I had you pegged for a copper—but copper and gold don't run in the same vein."

"With me they do."

The steel in her eyes glinted. "So you're a private dick. Where do I fit in with the money?"

She walked over to one of the beach-umbrella-ed tables and sat down. We were at the far end of the narrow dance-hall, away from the clash and din of the orchestra and the gong that tolled off the dances. The gong clanged several times to each piece of music. I pulled my chair close.

"It's the sixty-four dollar question—multiplied. How do you fit in with the grand? Maybe you could help. Maybe you could tell me why somebody would pay me a thousand bucks to date you tonight."

"No, I couldn't," she said coolly. She tried to bore holes in me with her big blue eyes. "Maybe this is just a new approach."

I shook my head. "You're a neat package, I'll admit, but I wouldn't have left my air-cooled bar to come up here to this hothouse for any girl on two feet."

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"Then why—"

"Like I said, one thousand dollars—maybe the chance of more. I'll begin at the beginning. Do you know a person named Nevel Nason?"

Clarissa shook her black, silky head.

"Well, this Nevel Nason walked into my office, plunked down a G in front of my secretary-assistant and said the dough was mine if I dated you tonight. But there's more to it. I get an additional four thousand—if I take you to my apartment."

Clarissa grew stiff in the chair. A cigarette girl came up with some rake-off butts; Clarissa's hand sliced the air with angry impatience, sending the other away.

"Easy," I said. "I said that the way I did on purpose—to get your reaction. Okay, I got it. You're definitely not putting on an act. Put yourself in my place—I had to find out how you fitted into this setup. Frankly, I can't figure the thing at all. Maybe someone's playing games, or trying to make a damned fool of me. But I'm curious enough and mercenary enough to see it through."

Clarissa arched her brows. "I suppose it would hurt your reputation—to be caught in your apartment with a singer from a cheap taxi-dance joint."

I pushed both palms out toward her. "Please. Please don't get me wrong. The only blue blood in me is black-and-blue from knocking around. I've been a soda jerker, movie usher and bellhop. Say! You said you were a singer. Nevel Nason said you were a taxi dancer. Apparently she doesn't know you too well."

Clarissa looked at me for long, quiet moments. She said, "All right, you've got a date. And, to be mercenary myself, what do I get out of it?"

"Without you, I get nothing. So—a split. Right down the middle. As of now, we've earned five hundred dollars each."

"And two thousand more for me if I go to your apartment?" she said. "Suppose we go to your office and split that grand, first. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," I said.

"I quit here at one. Right now I've got to do a number."

"I'll stick around, Clarissa, I'd like to hear you sing."

She smiled for the first time, and it was something to see. "I haven't a very good

voice, but it's good enough to get by in a place like this. . . . Incidentally, what's your name?"

"Rawson," I said. "Jack Rawson."

She got up, offered her hand. This was the first time I had touched her. Bells didn't ring or sparks didn't shoot between us, but something happened. It felt good.

"All right, Jack. See you later."

I forced myself not to watch her walk away. But the tail of my eye did register a wavering flame effect that sent me to the bar to do something about a very dry throat.

The beer wasn't too good but it was wet. I smoked a cigarette and tried to figure out what all this horsing around was about.

The orchestra stopped and the silence really ached. Then I saw Clarissa's lushly-filled flame gown ascend to the dais. She moved toward the mike.

AND that was when the cops came pouring into the Surf. Police whistles shrilled into the drone of voices. Groans of dismay went up to the men near me at the bar.

"Vice raid!"

"If my wife—"

There was a wild rush for the exits, but no one was going to get anywhere, I could see. I took another sip of beer. More cops swarmed in. This raid was too complete and efficient to be a routine vice roundup. Bribes, pleas and entreaties fell upon deaf official ears.

A phalanx of cops pushed through the main entrance, then the phalanx opened to let a dapper little man strut into the dance-hall. This dapper little man was the D. A.

District Attorney Plunkett came to a halt in the exact center of the dance floor. His aides drew up behind him with the pomp of general staff officers. Each had his special duty and went about it with military precision. Then District Attorney Plunkett spotted me.

From the corner of my eye I could see the red-headed dancing hostess with the gentle sway. She was staring bug-eyed at me as Plunkett, backed by his investigators, detectives and gold-badge policemen, stood in front of me. The redhead seemed to be trying to squeeze back inconspicuously into the crowd. Curvaceous Clarissa and her

wavering-flame gown were nowhere in sight.

The D.A. fanned himself reflectively with his straw hat. "Good evening, Rawson. Is it possible that you're here for—pleasure?"

"It's possible, Plunkett," I said. Then I finished my beer and put down the glass.

Plunkett addressed the crowd: "Anyone giving a false name will be dealt with harshly."

Dismay and apprehension clouded the faces of the customers. But the hostesses took the announcement with sighs of relief. There'd be no night-court jaunt for them.

District Attorney Plunkett turned his eyes back to me. Plunkett was all right, but he was fifty-fifty manhunter and headline-hunter. Whatever had happened to bring Plunkett here was being weighed in terms of screamers, banners and pictures. This was election year. He nodded me to a place down the bar.

"It is rather a coincidence, your being here—for pleasure. Which reminds me, Rawson, you have quite a secretary."

"She," I said, "is none of your business. Don't get any wrong ideas."

"Always the gentleman," murmured the D.A. "But let me assure you that your relationship with your secretary is the business of the district attorney's office." He fanned himself for several moments. "How long have you employed her?"

"Two years," I said. "Why?"

"In due time, Rawson. Of course, you checked her references?"

I nodded. "She used to work for a private detective named Rex Keever."

"Did Keever like the idea of Miss Walker leaving him and going over to you?"

"I've never asked him," I said.

"Too bad. I guess we'll never know the story on that. Keever won't be likely to tell us—with his head bashed in."

Now it was out, the reason for the D.A. and the police brass. I said nothing.

He cleared his throat. "How long have you been in this smelly place—and what have you been doing?"

"About three quarters of an hour. The ape at the door noticed the guns under my coat. I danced with a redhead. Had some beer. Sat out a dance with a brunette. More beer. Then you came in."

"All for pleasure, Mr. Rawson?"

"All for pleasure, Mr. Plunkett."

Detective-Lieutenant Tim O'Sullivan came over to us. He's one of cleverest lads on the Homicide Squad.

I said, "Hello, Tim."

He grinned. "Hi, Jack." Then he handed D.A. Plunkett a brown envelope. "You said you wanted to see this, sir, before it went into the captain's safe."

The D.A. took a filmy white handkerchief from the envelope. He whisked it to and fro under his nose.

I got a good whiff of the perfume. Making my movements slow and careless, I took out cigarettes and got one going. The D.A. tucked the handkerchief back into the envelope. Suddenly he took it out again, held it under my nose, saying:

"Did you notice any of the girls using this scent, Rawson?"

"No," I lied.

The D.A. handed the envelope back to O'Sullivan. "I don't envy the man who has to smell around here."

"The girls will all be checked, sir." O'Sullivan nodded to me and walked away.

I asked the D.A., "Want me to stick around?"

"Awhile," he said casually. "Do you want to go downstairs in the alley and see what somebody did to Rex Keever's head?"

"Not especially," I said.

His shrug could have meant anything.

I finished my cigarette in nonchalant aloofness. Then, as swiftly as possible, I took a round-about way to where Clarissa Regan was sitting at a table alone, chain-smoking. I made an elaborate business of patting my pockets, then asked her: "May I bum a cigarette from you?"

She tossed a pack across the table. Her blue eyes were guarded, careful. "So you are a cop. And all the while I was beginning to believe that story about twenty-five hundred dollars."

I lighted one of her butts and said swiftly, "Listen. Get rid of your handkerchief and any others you have in your pocket-book."

Her eyes got sick.

I went on, "If there's a dime-store perfume machine in this joint, squirt yourself and the inside of your pocketbook good. Tell the cops that you want to go to the little girl's room."

Clarissa pushed out the words through stiff lips. "Why are you doing this?"

"Five thousand dollars," I said. "We're still in business, baby. Partners."

CHAPTER TWO

Suspicious Lady

DISTRICT ATTORNEY PLUNKETT kindly permitted Clarissa and me to leave the Surf, after the mortal remains of private-peep Rex Keever had been lugged off in the meat wagon.

The marquee-shadowed, family-like entrance to the Surf was crawling with cops. Detective-Lieutenant Tim O'Sullivan came down with us to clear us through the cordon. This seemed to signify that Distract Attorney Plunkett was convinced that I had been at the Surf only to see Clarissa Regan.

Clarissa looked good enough to attract any man. She had changed into a candy-striped cotton dress which revealed fine legs that the flame gown had covered. She wore no hat on her silky black hair. High-heeled, ankle-strapped white shoes, white gloves and an out-size bag touched off the toothsome picture.

I steered her away from a waiting cab, and she slanted an inquiring glance up at me. "You want to air me out a bit? This dime store perfume is slowly suffocating me."

"No, I want to talk to you where there's no chance of being overheard. Up at the next corner seems okay." We walked slowly in the sultry, depressing heat. The street was dingy, lined with brownstone tenements. People hung out of every window, gazing at the crowded entrance of the Surf. The high stoops were peopled with perspiring citizens.

Up at the corner was a dimly lighted delicatessen. We stood there while I got two cigarettes going.

"What was your handkerchief doing in the alley beside Rex Keever's bashed-in head?" I asked bluntly.

Clarissa met my eyes and held them steadily. "I went down in the alley, hoping to get a breath of air. A light suddenly came on in one of the windows in the back. Then I saw the man on the ground. I'd been standing right beside him all the time. He'd been badly beaten. I felt for his pulse. When I was sure he was dead, I went back

into the Surf and kept my mouth shut. My handkerchief must have dropped when I saw him. I swear I jumped like a scalded cat."

Her saying that she first looked for signs of life before running away from the guy had a ring of sincerity for me. She went on, "Then you came into the Surf, with your song and dance about the five thousand dollars." She shrugged, a delicious movement in the dim light. "I still don't know whether or not you're lying."

"That's easily proven," I said, stepping into the street to signal a cab. "By the way," I said over my shoulder to her, "I noticed that you dodged all the press photos at the Surf. How come? A little publicity—"

"—would cost me my daytime job."

The cab swung into the curb. I handed Clarissa in, gave the cabbie my office address and settled back on the hot leather seat.

"What kind of a job?"

"I'm secretary to an insurance executive."

I wagged my head. "Wonders will never cease. Why two jobs? You need the money? But tell me something. When I first made my proposition in the Surf, you were pretty cold toward me. Then, all of a sudden, you warmed up to my idea. Now, you're here on the way to my office. Considering that you're working at two jobs, the money must be important to you—but it's not all. What changed you, Clarissa?"

"Something you said, Jack."

The cab slid into the curb. I looked out and saw the darkened front of my office building.

We walked across the sidewalk up to the locked glass doors of the building. Back at the end of the corridor I could see a dim bulb over a table with an open book on it. I rang the night bell and could hear its strident peal fill the foyer and rise up the elevator shafts to search out the night watchman.

Clarissa said, "I'll tell you what your magic words were, Jack. You said that you had been a movie usher."

"Complete with white trousers with a blue stripe, white mess jacket with brass buttons and blue epaulets, starched dickey and a black bow tie." I bowed, touched my temple in salute. "Carlton service, ma'am."

The night watchman was at the glass door, peering out at us. His muted voice came through the glass:

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Rawson." He turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

We walked in silence to the elevator and got inside. Something seemed to be bothering Clarissa. She was mad at me again for some reason or other.

On the 20th floor, I led the way to my office door. It announced grandly: *Rawson Detective Agency*. I inserted the key in the door.

Clarissa said, "You certainly must have done some tall checking up on me—to learn about my working at the Carlton Theater."

I was so dumbfounded I took the key out of the lock without unlocking the door. I stared at Clarissa. "Will you say that again—slow-like?"

She tossed her head in anger. "I'm mad at myself for swallowing your whole lying story."

"But it's the truth!" I insisted. "Before tonight, I never laid eyes on you or even heard your name. Now—wait a minute—" This whole whacky business was just be-

ginning to make a glimmer of sense.—
"When were you in the Carlton?"

Those tiny pinpoint of blue steel were back in Clarissa's eyes. "Nine years ago."

I tapped my finger gently on her shoulder. "That's very interesting. And it's a fact that I, also, worked there nine years ago."

She twitched my hand off her shoulder. "Forgive me if I think you're a liar."

I LET that one slide by because I could understand her viewpoint. My mind swept back to those days when I worked in an office from nine to six and at the movie theater from eight to closing. The afternoon shift of usherettes went off the floor at seven o'clock. The night shift of ushers went on at seven. Because I couldn't get from my daytime job, eat dinner and be on the floor by seven, I had a special arrangement of starting at eight and locking up every night with the assistant manager.

"Clarissa," I said, "I never saw any of the usherettes because I went on the floor from eight to closing every night. You girls

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knocked off at seven. Let's see, you may remember some of the ushers at that time. Billy was a tall blond lad. Dick was stocky and dark haired. Skinny was the film boy. Skinny needed glasses but thought they would mar his masculine beauty. He could hardly see his hand out in front of his face. Joe was the assistant manager. Joe was a—

"Don't say it."

I said, "Guess we both knew Joe . . . Now. What do you make of this whole night's business? Where do you fit in, honey?"

Clarissa moved close to me. "I wish I knew, Jack. I'm beginning to be frightened. First, there's this business of five thousand dollars—and then, that dead man in the alley . . ."

I put my arms around her, drew her to me. She came willingly at first, then abruptly pulled back. Her voice became very solemn:

"Jack, you're carrying guns. Two of them!" She paused for a long minute before going on. "Let's postpone that kiss till we're not thinking of dead men. Then—then we'll concentrate," her eyes met mine steadily, "on the kiss."

I dropped my arms back to my sides, nodded toward my office door. "Let's go inside, get the money from the safe—and see if we can get a line on this mysterious Nevel Nason who knows we both worked at the Carlton." I stepped away from her reluctantly and opened the door to my office.

Terrie's large, blond-oak secretarial desk dominated the reception room. There was an ornate brass lamp on the desk. Clarissa's eyes took in the room as she said:

"I detect a woman's touch, Mr. Rawson. Nice place, Jack. You've come a long way since the Carlton." She wagged her head slowly. "It floors me to think that we worked there at the same time—and never knew each other."

"I'll bet it would floor Nevel Nason, too. She undoubtedly figured that we would recognize each other from the Carlton. Old friend and stuff. And your being an old friend, or old co-worker, you would fall right in line with my suggestion." I rubbed my palms briskly together. "Nevel Nason never figured on your doubting my word."

In my private office, I tried the safe. It

was a small, rugged-looking chunk of steel. I sat on my heels in front of it and dialed the combination. Swinging open the heavy steel panel—I stared at the empty cash box. My ledgers were in there, and two extra bulldogged .44 Colts and a box of shells. But that was all. As I suspected, there was no money.

Clarissa's eyes were mostly veiled by her black, sooty lashes. She said, "It was only money, anyway."

"Terrie lied to me. There never was any money." I shook my head. "I'm sorry for all my big talk about thousands and thousands of dollars—"

"You sound like Mrs. Murphy."

"Private joke?"

"Mrs. Murphy," Clarissa repeated. "A nice old lady who used to come to the Carlton. She always sat in the last row, and usually talked to herself about thousands of dollars."

"Sure," I said, remembering her then, "a gentle old lady with pure white hair. Summer and winter, she always wore a black coat with a great, big monkey-fur collar."

Clarissa swung off the desk and came over to me. Her smile radiated red-hot atoms. "Forgive me for doubting you, Jack."

"Thanks, honey," I said, making sure to keep my arms from going around her. "I can use a little belief in me right now. When I opened that safe, I didn't expect to find any money in it—but I was still hoping that I would. I believed Terrie up until you pointed out how strange it was that we had never known each other at the Carlton. Believe me, kid, I didn't lie to you."

"I know you didn't, Jack. We'll just call it one of Mrs. Murphy's thousands . . . What now?"

"I'm getting right back on Nevel Nason's planned schedule. I'm going to my apartment."

"Me, too," said Clarissa.

I shook my head. "We don't know what we'll be walking into. Don't forget what happened to Rex Keever tonight." I sliced the air decisively with my hand. "You don't go."

Clarissa shook her head. "I do go. you've got two guns to protect me with. What do you want—a bazooka?"

CHAPTER THREE

Kiss the Corpse Good-By

WE WENT to my apartment. My two windows face the front of the house. They were dark. If anyone was up there looking out, they would have seen Clarissa with me as we walked into the lighted entrance. The apartment house was the center one in a row of five exactly alike. They were remodeled brownstones with a face-lifting and casement windows.

My apartment was the second floor front. We walked across the small foyer, Clarissa's heels clicking smartly. Those heels would have been heard up in my rooms. Then we went up the marble steps. I unlocked my apartment door, opened it a crack and said as lightly as I could manage:

"Come into my parlor." I pushed Clarissa back from the door, ducked inside alone and closed the door behind me. Silently I dropped to the floor, crouched on the balls of my feet, looking and listening. The apartment was dark, the only illumination coming from a nearby street lamp.

The light from the street lamp glinted on something long and shiny that was sliding out of my bedroom door. Both of my bulldogged .44's were in my hands. I fired two fast shots from each gun. The reverberations from the walls of the tiny foyer were deafening. But this noise was nothing to the thunderous blast that mushroomed from my bedroom door.

The shotgun blast tore into the wall over my head. Plaster, chips of wood from my television set, bits of glass rained onto my face. If that shotgun had been fired from a few feet further away, I would have been included in its shredding, tearing destruction.

A heavy thud sounded on the bedroom floor. I lay still in the choking powder fumes. My guns were ready for the slightest motion in the bedroom—but none came.

Slowly penetrating my shocked brain was the racket of someone pounding the corridor door. I rose from the splinters and plaster dust, found the foyer switch and pressed it. A ceiling light—spared, somehow by the blast—sent an oblong of smoke-filtered brilliance into the bedroom. In that oblong of light, for all the world like the shape of a coffin, lay Terrie.

The effect was even more startling when Terrie raised her head and gave me a twisted smile. I saw two dark stains on the front of her dress. She was half laying on the floor and half propped up against the wall. Beside her was the discharged, single-barrel shotgun.

Her low voice chided me, "Two hits and two misses. Just fair-to-middling shooting, Mr. Rawson." Her eyes moved to the two .44's still clutched in my hands. She said, "You won't need them now, unless you want to finish the job quick."

Swiftly I slid the .44's into my armpit holsters.

The pounding on the corridor door increased in tempo. Going to the corridor door, I opened it and stepped out into the outer hallway. A candy-striped hurricane hit me, almost knocking me off my feet.

"Jack, darling—are you all right? Are you—?"

"I'm all right, honey. I was shot in the television." Gently I pushed her out into the corridor. "You wait for me downstairs, honey."

Clarissa asked, "Who's inside, Terrie or Nevel Nason?"

"There never was a Nevel Nason," I said. "Terrie stopped two slugs. She can't last very long. . . . You wait downstairs, honey."

The only other apartment on the floor, in the back of the house, was still untenanted. But I heard people talking excitedly in the corridors both upstairs and down. I went back into my apartment and closed the door.

Taking up the phone I called for an ambulance.

Then I went into the bedroom. Terrie seemed to be in the same position, but her eyes were closed. When I went in, she opened her eyes. "Why didn't you invite 'honey' in? I always did want to meet a real heiress."

I chewed over that last remark.

Terrie studied me for a silent second, then said, "A girl's dying wish, Mr. Rawson. You should humor a dying girl."

I didn't answer her. I was feeling distinctly uneasy about something; for some reason I couldn't clearly understand. Terrie was speaking again:

"Anyway, I brought you and honey together again. I'm some Cupid, eh?"

"That," I said quietly, "is where you made your mistake. You thought Clarissa would fall for my line right off. You figured we'd remember each other from the good old Carlton-theatre days. But, you see, Terrie, I *didn't* know Clarissa—or any of the girls there—so she wanted to make sure of me. She wanted to go to the office for the money that you said was in the safe."

Terrie's eyes closed again. Her brows knitted. She sank her teeth into her lower lip.

I sat on my heels in front of her. "Does it hurt, kid?"

Her eyelids raised. Her eyes, now again inscrutable blue ice, looked into mine. "Yes. But most of the pain is in my head, thinking how stupid I've been. Rex talked me out of leaving that thousand in the safe. Damn him to hell!"

"Knowing Rex Keever for the yellow-bellied rat he was," I said, "I figure that this deal of yours must have given him cold feet at the last minute."

"Check, Mr. Rawson. Rex was going to queer the whole business there at the Surf. I got him into the alley and—uh—dealt him out."

I fired two cigarettes, stuck one between her lips. "There must be money back of your play, Terrie. Lots of it."

"The chance of a lifetime," breathed Terrie. Her usually unfathomable blue eyes lighted with the first emotion I had ever seen in them. And that emotion was greed. "It all started right in your office, Mr. Rawson, with that first letter from Knight, Adams and Knight. You never saw it, of course. Or the ones that followed."

FOR several seconds I was very thoughtful. KAK were the biggest and swankiest lawyers in the city. I said, "They wanted me to find Clarissa Regan. She seems to have become an heiress for some reason or other. Why did they pick me to find her? I never laid eyes on her before tonight."

Terrie was weakening. She spoke slowly. "Mrs. Murphy made the same mistake that I did."

"Mrs. Murphy!" I got to my feet. "What did that nice old lady—?"

"That nice old lady," butted in Terrie, "owned the Carlton Theater, among other very valuable properties. She willed the

Carlton to Clarissa Regan. Mrs. Murphy had lost track of Regan. But the old lady had followed your business career. She figured you knew Regan and would be the one to find her and break the good news to her. Joyous and happy ending, isn't it—for Regan? And me? I get slugs in my stomach. Compliments of Two-gun Rawson." Her voice took on a pleading note, something new for Terrie. "Please bring her in. I want to congratulate her. Sporting of me, eh? Stout fella—that's me."

"I'll bring her in," I said. "And the ambulance will be here any second now." I wagged my head at Terrie. "You had to kill me, didn't you? You knew I'd never let you pass yourself off as Clarissa Regan and collect a fortune. And I figure that my shotgun murder was going to be blamed on some unknown hood with a grudge."

"You're much smarter, Mr. Rawson, than I ever gave you credit for being. You've got the whole angle figured."

I shook my head. "All except how the hell you figured to blast me with a shotgun, spirit Clarissa away, and pop back here to act the role of Clarissa."

"Rex had rented the back apartment on this floor. We were going to hold Clarissa there and dispose of her later. With Rex out of the picture, I had to go through with it anyway. I hoped that I could swing the whole deal myself—with luck." Her mouth twisted. "Lucky me. Well, Mr. Rawson, let me congratulate the real lucky lady." She slumped back against the wall. "It will probably be the very last thing I'll do."

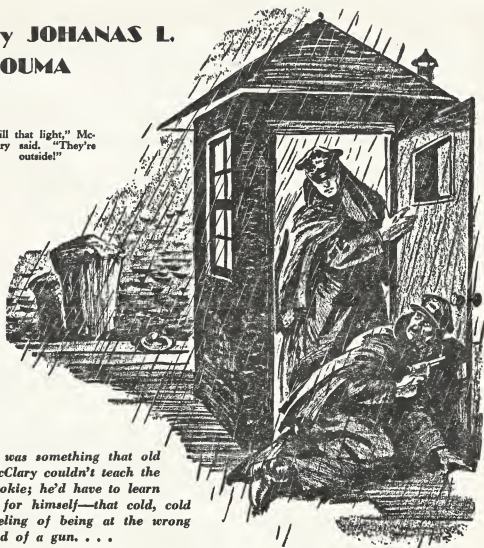
Somehow I didn't feel right. Something was dead wrong. I walked over toward the corridor door. When Terrie had changed her position—That was it! My hand on the doorknob, I looked back to what had partially registered on my mind. Under Terrie's arm was an exploded shotgun shell.

Then I saw the barrel of the gun slowly raise in Terrie's hands. The big, gaping muzzle centered on the door and on me. Terrie had reloaded while I had been outside talking to Clarissa. Now, with her last physical movement on earth, she was going to press the trigger to kill both Clarissa and me.

There was no escape for me. I was at
(Please continue on page 112)

By JOHANAS L.
BOUMA

"Kill that light," McClary said. "They're outside!"



It was something that old McClary couldn't teach the rookie; he'd have to learn it for himself—that cold, cold feeling of being at the wrong end of a gun. . . .

Occupational Hazard

LEUTENANT CLARK was on the phone when Dave McClary came in. He glanced up and nodded at a chair, but McClary crossed the office to look at a photograph of the city police force, taken nearly thirty years before. Young McClary, third from the left, second row, wore a stern expression. The old McClary smiled faintly. It was getting so he was having trouble associating himself with the rookie in the photograph. The

shock of black hair was now grey. The shoulders, once lean and erect, were thick slopes that strained the seams of his uniform coat.

But the change was only physical. McClary had never regretted joining the force. His pride in his job had never faltered.

The lieutenant pushed the phone to one side and snapped a switch on the desk intercom. "Be right with you," he told McClary, then turned his head to the

intercom and said, "Come in here, Gregg."

The door opened and a small, lean man in plainclothes entered the office. He grinned at McClary. "Well, Dave, how long now before you collect the fat pension?"

McClary had never been able to figure out why so many cops were stuck on the pension deal. Catch four or five in a bull session, and all you heard was how many years to go before collecting the pension. As if it was some kind of goal, and all you did was sweat out the years in between. McClary wished he had another ten years to sweat, but he said, "A week. How's it going in your department?"

"Fine," said Gregg. "Well, watch the alleys tonight. That Lefty Markham ain't no slouch."

"You come to gab or to take orders?" the lieutenant said. "A guy named Adams called. Phillip Adams. His cabin cruiser was stolen from his private dock about an hour ago. See what you can dig up."

Gregg made a face. "At this time of night? Hell, it's raining—"

"Get going," Clark said.

Gregg shrugged and went out. McClary glanced at the wall clock, then gave the lieutenant a blunt look of impatience. "I've got five minutes to meet roll call."

Clark didn't answer directly. He leaned back in the chair and looked at his hands. Then he looked up and said, "I'd rather you didn't go out tonight, Dave."

NOTHING changed on McClary's face. He knew from the way the lieutenant had spoken that it wasn't an order.

"That rookie," Clark said. "What's his name—"

McClary frowned. "Eddie Jameson."

"Yeah. Well, he's able to handle the beat by himself, isn't he?"

"No, he isn't," McClary said shortly.

A look of annoyance crossed Clark's face. "He had top marks in rookie school. And before that he had three years in Germany with the MP's. It seems to me—"

"Pounding a beat isn't the Army," McClary cut in. "Anyway, he's still too damned cocky."

The lieutenant gave a small grin. "They tell me you weren't exactly bashful when you joined the force."

McClary started to say that it had been different with him, but he knew it hadn't,

not really. But a stubborn look settled on his face. "I'll finish my hitch the way I started—pounding a beat. And I'm not turning in my badge until I'm certain the kid can handle it."

Clark leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk. "It's just that I hate to see you get hurt."

"You'll hate it worse when word gets around that you pulled me off the beat because some punk threatened to gun me."

"Ah!" the lieutenant said, and McClary knew then that he had won. He knew the lieutenant would be thinking of the department, and how it would reflect on the department if one cop was given undue protection at the first hint of danger.

Clark said, "We know Lefty got in town this morning, but he shook our man. Be careful, Dave. He's nobody's fool."

"He's a punk," McClary said and went out. There was still time, and he used the pay phone down the hall. In a moment his wife was on the line.

"Maggie?" he asked and felt good when he heard her quiet answer. Calling her before he went on duty was a habit the years had not altered. "I'm in kind of a hurry, Maggie."

"What's the matter? The lieutenant call you on the carpet?"

McClary smiled. She knew about this thing with Lefty Markham, but it was like her not to worry him with her worries. "Rain held me up," he said.

"Well, don't forget to invite that young man you're working with to dinner. My land, living in a rooming house! He probably hasn't had a decent meal—"

"Now, Maggie. The next thing you'll be for hunting him a wife."

"Probably what he needs."

"He'll never find one like you, Maggie," he said, then said good-night and hung up, smiling. But the blunt expression was back on his face when he entered the squad room.

THE rain slanted with the wind when they trooped out of the Harbor Precinct Building. It put an instant shine on raincoats, still warm from the radiators. McClary pulled his hood down and checked his equipment for the last time. This midnight-to-eight beat was never a picnic, and tonight anything could happen.

Eddie Jameson caught up with him on

the street, the long raincoat slapping against his legs. Eddie was an alert young man, tall and lean, complete with crew haircut and grin. He said, "A night to hole up with beer and hamburgers."

"You'll get coffee at four," McClary said. Eddie grinned and said, "Okay, old-timer."

The kid had an edge on the average rookie, all right. McClary had to admit that. But some things a cop learned only through experience, and during the week they had worked together McClary had got the feeling that Eddie figured he knew it all.

Walking down the street, McClary felt the weather in his joints. By the time eight o'clock rolled around he would be stiff and tired, glad to get home. Still it saddened him to know that he would soon turn in his badge. Thirty years, the last fifteen on this very beat, so that the smell and the feel of the streets and the waterfront had become part of him, as familiar as the house he lived in.

Eddie tried the doors of the shops and the stores as they moved toward Front Street. McClary waited on the corner and glanced around. The street had its toes in the harbor and its head at the foot of Brick Hill. The street was beer joints, hock shops, flop houses and all-night movie houses on one side; the other side was tracks, a rail depot, a few scattered warehouses. Beyond the tracks an oiled road followed the piers that slanted into the bay. The big houses fronting the beach started around the Point and stretched for a mile. That was prowl-car territory.

Eddie came back and cracked a poor joke about ducks. It ruffled McClary a little to witness the rookie's cocky assurance. He supposed Eddie reminded him of his own

reckless youth and made him envious.

But there was more to it than that, McClary knew. This young one didn't think too much of McClary. He would be wondering why this old cop still pounded a beat after thirty years. This one would be climbing the ladder in his head, wearing the good suit instead of the uniform, seeing his name and "Police Commissioner" printed on a glass door. And maybe, just maybe, he could get up there. But by the time he'd learned the angles, by the time he'd bucked the political factions, by the time he'd beat himself dry trying to pass the stiff examinations—maybe by that time he'd change his tune.

A kink developed in McClary's right thigh, and he had to stop and massage it. Back in '36 a hophead's bullet had ripped the muscles wide open. Eddie looked up the street and said, "What's all this talk about Lefty Markham? Didn't he just get out of the pen?"

"A couple days ago," McClary said.

They moved on along the sidewalk, in the rain.

"Well," Eddie said, "he's out to get you on account of you killing his brother, isn't that right?"

"Pretty good reason," McClary said. He glanced at the rookie, at the lean face framed by the hood.

"No, not the way I see it," the rookie said. "How did it happen?"

"Lefty and Pat headed a gang that specialized in robbing warehouses. I caught up with 'em one night, is all."

"How did they work it?"

"There were four in the gang," McClary explained patiently. "They had a truck backed up to Jenkins' warehouse and were loading it."

"Yeah, but what happened?"

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"I'll tell you about it some time," McClary said.

HE DIDN'T like to talk about it, but he could remember very easily how it had been that night. When he had told them it was all over, two of them had jumped off the dock and had got away. Pat had tried for the cab of the truck, throwing two shots at McClary as he wrenched open the door. McClary had killed Pat with a single bullet from his .38 Police Special before lunging at Lefty and dropping him with a kick.

When Lefty heard that his brother was dead, he had screamed revenge. He was still screaming when the judge sentenced him to five years in San Quentin, and he'd never stopped.

Now Lefty was out, his sentence served, and McClary didn't need a blueprint to know why he'd made the city his first stop.

A brawl broke out of the saloon up ahead, and McClary was there first to break it up. Maybe because he'd sensed it coming. You could expect three or four brawls every night in these dives. These two were young fellows, longshoremen, and they knew McClary. All-right guys with a few beers too many. McClary had them collared when Eddie said crisply, "I'll call the wagon."

"Not necessary," McClary said in an aside. To the dock workers, he said, "Think you can behave yourself the rest of the night?"

"Sure, Mac," they said in unison.

"Disturbing the peace," Eddie said, glowering. "Fighting drunk on the street."

McClary dropped his hands. "Off the street," he said.

The two grinned with relief and walked away.

Eddie turned with a hard look. "The book says—"

"I know what it says," McClary broke in. "I read it—a long time ago. But give and take, give and take. Don't draw a black line. You'll live longer and sleep better."

They made the length of the street and then cut across the tracks to the waterfront. Eddie butted his head against the rain as if he were trying to rush this eight-hour shift. McClary kept a wary eye on the dark places.

They turned on the oiled, rain-spattered

road. Freighters loomed at the first three berths; the rest of the berths were empty. Single lights marked the warehouse that stretched the length of the piers.

McClary breathed easier when they turned from the road and walked to the end of the last pier. The watchman's shanty had a single bulb lighting its door. Dan, a thin man wearing the dark green uniform of a private guard under his slicker, stepped outside at their approach. "Coffee's on," he said.

"Not tonight," McClary said. He dug for a handkerchief and wiped rain from his face. "Everything clear?"

"Except for the weather," Dan chuckled.

A half-dozen tarpaulin-covered stacks dotted the pier beyond the shanty. Rain splattered on the drab canvas and ran in rivulets from its folds. "Why didn't they put that stuff inside?" McClary asked.

"Warehouse's full," Dan said. "Sure about the coffee?"

McClary nodded. He looked at Eddie who was catching a smoke in the lee of the shanty. When the rookie flipped the butt away, McClary said, "Let's go," and turned back to the road and hamburgers at Toby's place.

IT WAS twenty past four when they left Toby's. The wind and the rain hit them, flattened their raincoats against their bodies. Eddie swore. "You'd think it'd let up."

"You'll see plenty nights like it," McClary said.

They walked along the street that was dark and empty now. McClary moved his thick shoulders beneath the raincoat, remembering when the street had been open to every manner of vice. That was when a reputed toughness had bought him this beat, the year young Mike had died. Some of his ambition had gone with young Mike.

A prowler car swung around the corner close to the curb, its tires shooting a spray of water. McClary frowned when he saw the lieutenant next to the driver. He leaned over to look at the lieutenant and said, "You're supposed to go off duty at midnight."

The lieutenant knuckled his nose. "Couldn't sleep. Anything doing?"

"Not what you expect," McClary said. He knew why the lieutenant couldn't sleep, and it irked him a little.

"Still no line on Lefty," the lieutenant said. "Keep your eyes open."

"That's been my trade," McClary grunted.

"I've got men ready in case anything happens." The lieutenant looked at Eddie.

"How's it going, Jameson?"

"All right, sir."

"Get to a call box at the first sign of trouble," the lieutenant said.

"Yes, sir," Eddie said.

The lieutenant lifted his hand and the prowler car rolled away. Eddie shook his head and said, "That's for me. Why walk when you can ride?"

"You learned to crawl before you learned to walk," he said. "Let's go."

Three rounds of the beat in an eight-hour shift. The steady tramp of leather along the sidewalk, and McClary thinking of the pension that could keep him idle—if he wanted it to. If he lived to collect it. He had no doubts concerning Lefty's threat.

Crossing the tracks, McClary reached through the slash pocket of his raincoat and eased his holstered revolver around so that it felt handy. They followed the oiled road past the freighters. Eddie turned his head and said, "Lefty must be nuts to come back here. If I was him, I'd be heading for new territory."

"You're not him," McClary said.

The thing was that crooks didn't think in the way of honest men. Lefty, a habitual criminal, hated the law and what it stood for. The uniform was his enemy. He would not be thinking of McClary as an individual, but as a representative of that which he feared and hated. It just happened that McClary had been forced into the position of target for his hatred.

Now they were walking along the pier again, Eddie close to the warehouse, McClary where he could look down into the bay. The tide was out, and the black water, ruffled by wind and rain, slapped noisily against barnacle-crusting pilings. McClary was wondering when and where and how it would come. And he was suddenly thinking of Maggie, and just as suddenly not thinking in that direction. Such things had happened before, yes, but in this case...

The thing was that Lefty would be very smart in this operation. He'd had five years to plan it, and he would be impatient. But

smart. He would have the manner of it well planned, plus the perfect getaway.

And then, all of a sudden, with Eddie skirting the puddles that fronted Dan's shanty, with McClary a dozen paces to the rear, McClary heard an alien sound and knew the answer. He drew his gun and stepped quickly to the side of the warehouse and gave a low whistle. Eddie didn't turn; he was opening the shanty door and looking inside. McClary had moved to the corner of the warehouse when Eddie looked back.

"Dan's not here," Eddie called. "There's coffee on the heater. Let's grab a cup."

He entered the shanty.

McCLARY cursed softly and stayed where he was. He did not like this situation, because what he had heard was the purr of an idling engine, and he had remembered that a Phillip Adams had reported a stolen cabin cruiser. Yes. That had been Lefty's plan, all right. He would know that if he killed McClary the city and the highways would not mean safety. So he had stolen the cruiser, alone or with help, and had run it beneath the pier. From there he could go anywhere in this darkness. He could steal out of the harbor and down the coast before daylight. He could have arranged a rendezvous somewhere along a beach and be a hundred miles away by daylight.

McClary looked back along the dark and empty pier. He strained to listen but could not hear the engine now. Eddie opened the door of the shanty. In the glow of the single light, through the rain, McClary saw him hold up a cup, heard him call:

"You coming, Mac?"

McClary thought then that it would really be something if he was imagining all this. Maybe he was getting old. He put his right hand, holding the gun, against his thigh and started the walk to the shanty. His eyes slid along the tarpaulin-covered stacks, and as he walked he knew it was going to happen and he had trouble to keep from breaking into a run. A figure rose from behind the nearest stack. It was Lefty Markham, and Lefty was allowing McClary a good look at him because that was the way he wanted it.

McClary realized all this in the split second it took him to recognize Lefty, and

in that moment Lefty fired, and McClary was down and rolling, knowing he had been hit, but not badly.

There was a shout and a shot from a different angle. There was the sound of the shanty door being flung open, and McClary slid on his belly against it and looked up at Eddie's startled face.

"Kill the light," McClary said.

Eddie threw the cup against the bulb, breaking it. McClary put his hands against the shanty and got up in the darkness. He felt a burning sensation along his side where the bullet had creased him, and he said, "There's a phone inside. Call headquarters and tell 'em to have the police launch cover this pier. Clark will know what to do."

Eddie entered the shanty and McClary heard him calling. There's more than one out there, he thought, remembering the second shot. Maybe one in the cruiser, too. Eddie came back. "What do we do now?"

"We wait," McClary said. He was listening for sirens, remembering that ladders were spaced along the pilings, from the top of the pier to the catwalks beneath the pier. He saw the faint flicker of light to his left.

Eddie saw it too and McClary touched his arm and went ahead of him around the shanty. He could hear Eddie's hoarse breathing.

There was a shot behind them. McClary heard it thud against the shanty. They think we're inside, he thought, and heard feet running in front of them.

"This way," McClary said. He didn't want any more shooting if he could help it. He ducked and ran with Eddie behind him to a stack near the edge of the pier. There was a shout, then an answering shout. McClary peered around the stack. In the lighter darkness of the pier against the water he saw two figures scrambling over the edge. Lefty was turning tail, and McClary knew why when he heard the sirens, but not the police launch.

McClary said, "We go after them."

He ran heavily inside the raincoat to the edge of the pier, running at a crouch to spot one of the ladders. There was the roar of an engine bursting into full life. McClary cursed. He was moving on his knees, his hands feeling for a ladder in the darkness.

McClary's hand found the top rung of a ladder, and he grasped it with both hands and lowered himself, then scrambled down as fast as he could. When he was near the water, he groped with one leg, found the catwalk behind the ladder. He ran along it with the roar of the engine to one side. The boat was backing from beneath the pier, he knew, but he could not see it in the darkness. He stumbled, moved ahead carefully.

And suddenly was caught in the white glare of a spotlight.

McClary stood there in the glare. The cruiser was no more than twenty feet from him, and he knew an awful moment. A shot exploded on his left; a crash of glass followed the shot; the light went out. Three shots sounded in quick succession, followed by a scream, then another shot. A siren sounded from the bay. The police launch cut in sharply and flooded the pier with light. Past the piling, McClary saw the tan cruiser. Saw the rookie board it from a catwalk, his gun out in front of him. And McClary walked over there carefully, feeling suddenly foolish, feeling his age.

The rookie had been ahead of him all the time.

THE police launch had taken the cruiser in tow, and a dozen cops stood around the pier, talking. They had found the watchman unconscious behind the shanty. Eddie had killed one of the men in the exchange of shots and had wounded Lefty.

The lieutenant, who arrived after it was all over, didn't know this. "How did the rookie handle himself?" he asked McClary.

"He'll do," McClary said and explained what had happened.

The lieutenant chuckled. "You think he can handle the beat from now on?"

McClary nodded gravely. In his mind he was seeing the stern look on the rookie's face as he boarded the cruiser. And he felt again the agony of his own fumbling when quickness counted, and he thought, I had to be convinced sooner or later.

Walking with the lieutenant to the prowl car, he could face it. And in his mind he handed the beat over to Eddie Jameson. I'll wait for him to come off duty, he thought. I mustn't forget to invite him to dinner tonight.

Trigger Triangle

*Detective Gram had to learn that charity
begins at home—and ends in homicide.*

DETECTIVE Lieutenant Paul Gram sat across the desk from the girl. She was young and slim. She had dark brown eyes and black hair. The lipstick was gone, and she needed powder. As she talked she squeezed one thumb in the palm of its hand. Her face was beginning to show the strain, and the tears that had gone an hour before were threatening to return. Her name was Alice Meadows, and she had been arrested for murder.

By
DON JAMES



Gram glanced at his watch. It was 2:51 a.m. Almost three hours before he had brought her in, while news photographers flashed bulbs and reporters clamored for a story to beat the midnight deadline.

The case had moved fast. The body had been discovered at 9:40 p.m. by prowler car officers. The gun—identified by one o'clock through a trace of locally registered serial numbers, oil in the glove compartment, lint on the gun—had been on the ground on the far side of the car from the driver's seat. It wasn't suicide. The first flash hit the radio on the seven o'clock news. Mrs. Schultz had called in immediately. The girl had been arrested in her apartment.

Lab tests had identified the gun, but the paraffin test had missed. It didn't mean anything. She had worn gloves. There might not have been powder residue. It could miss.

Now he looked at her nervous hands. She was tiring. Across the room Sergeant Mike Judd sat in a chair tipped back against the wall and watched and listened.

Gram said, "Once again, Alice. Tell us again."

She shut her eyes. Her shoulders dropped even more listlessly.

"I'm so tired . . . please . . ."

"Just once more, Alice. From the beginning."

She began to speak again, with her eyes closed, and Gram thought it was like hearing Sue read a story to the kids for the fiftieth time. But this was the way you had to do it sometimes. You had to listen to every word, visualize every scene again, watch, wait, be alert for the thing that might be different—the thing that might break it.

"I met him down at Seaside last summer. One Sunday. I was on the beach and he sat near me and said something about the view and then . . ."

Gram lit a cigarette and began again to visualize it into a mental picture as her voice droned on:

* * *

His name was Clyde Downey. He was in his middle thirties, tall and slim. His eyes were blue, his hair brown. He said he was a salesman taking his vacation.

Alice Meadows was lonesome. She had come to Portland from Idaho and found a job with an insurance company as a typist. Other than the few men in her office, Clyde

Downey was the first man to speak more than a dozen sentences to her since she had left Idaho. In a few months life had become a dull routine of work and lonesome evenings in her small west-side apartment.

When the sun began to go down that first Sunday, Clyde stretched luxuriously in the sand and smiled at her.

"Hungry?"

"Starved!" She looked at him and felt an impulse to run her fingers through his hair, put her hands on his bare, tanned shoulders. She hadn't brought a bathing suit because she didn't own one and couldn't afford to buy one. The bus fare had taken her budget for the weekend. She wished she wore one now. It would have been good to swim once before returning.

He stood and smiled down at her. "Look . . . I've a cabin up the beach. If you'll come up there until I take a fast shower and dress I'll take you to a seafood dinner. There's a later bus you can take back to Portland."

She hesitated, but the frankness of his smile reassured her.

It was a larger cabin than she had expected. He busied himself in the kitchenette mixing drinks.

Again she hesitated, but he took it for granted that she wanted a drink before dinner.

"I'll take my shower. Then we'll get seafood."

He left her and the sound of the shower came through a door.

She sat at the window and watched the breakers and the setting sun. It was peaceful and friendly. She sipped the drink and, when he came out dressed in a sport shirt and slacks, her drink was gone. He reached for the glass. "Better have another. If we wait a half hour we'll miss the dinner crowd."

The second drink was stronger.

* * *

Gram interrupted. "He didn't tell you he was married?"

She shook her head.

"You're sure?"

She looked down at her clenched hands. "He didn't tell me."

"And for the next three months he took you out and you didn't know he was married?"

"I didn't know."

"When did you learn about his wife?"

"Tonight."

"Tell us again about that part, Alice."

* * *

When she answered the door, the woman stood there wearing a fur coat and a small, chic, black hat that emphasized her bloneness. She was smooth and expensive and sure of herself. She smiled and said, "Are you Alice Meadows?"

Alice stood uncertainly in the doorway, feeling the inadequacy of the raincoat she wore. She was going to meet Clyde. In a few moments he'd drive by in the sedan and they'd go for a ride in the rain.

"Yes . . ."

"Going out to meet Clyde?"

"I . . . who are you?"

"Clyde's wife."

For a half-moment the words were there, as if they'd been spoken from a radio, or a movie. They were part of someone else's life, not hers. Then they were hers. 'Clyde's wife.' This woman in the expensive fur and the chic hat—the woman with the cold blue eyes and thin smile—this was Clyde's wife.

Alice said, "That's . . . that's not true! He doesn't have a wife!"

"May I come in a moment?"

The woman stepped forward, and Alice drew back. She watched the woman shut the door and look around the small apartment. The smile didn't change.

"Did he say he was a salesman?" she said.

"Yes . . . but there's some mistake. You can't mean Clyde. He wouldn't—"

"There's no mistake. It's happened too often. Although it's never been a brunette before." She looked at Alice with deliberation, appraising her hair, eyes, the soft lines of her body beneath the raincoat.

"Listen . . ." Alice said, her anger quick in her voice, "I don't know who you are or what you want, but I think you'd better go. I don't want to talk with you . . ."

The woman smiled again. "You'll listen. It won't take long. I'm Edith Downey. I'm his wife with a certificate to prove it. We're not living together, but we're married and I don't intend to give him a divorce. I put up with him long enough to earn the check I get every month. I like it this way. I intend to keep it this way.

"Meanwhile, I don't appreciate having

him make a fool of me . . . or maybe I'm just a possessive shrew at heart. Anyway, I won't have him running around with other women. It's bad for his law practice and his income. I don't like scandal. Stay away from him or I'll make trouble . . . where you work, here where you live, anywhere I can."

She turned then and walked out, gently closing the door after her.

Alice stared at the closed door. After a time—a long time, it seemed—she went out and down the stairs. Clyde was parked at the curb. He opened the door, and she saw the whiteness of his smile.

"You're late, baby!" he said.

She got in the car and stared straight ahead of her.

"A woman was just up to the apartment," she said. "She said her name is Edith Downey. She said she's your wife."

She expected him to say something. He didn't. After a moment he lit a cigarette.

"Is it true?" she said.

"I should have told you, but—"

"She says she won't give you a divorce. You can't marry me."

His fingers played along the collar of her coat and his hand rested on her shoulder.

"Let's be sensible about this, Alice. What difference does it make for a while? Sooner or later I'll find a way out. She'll slip. I'll find grounds for divorce. Meanwhile, we're two adults. We have to face things sensibly. What we mean to each other is more important than—"

She leaned forward, away from his arm, and faced him.

"Can you marry me, Clyde?"

"Not right away, baby. Try to understand. Another year, perhaps. I'll find a way—"

"Now."

He frowned, and his lips tightened. A car moved into the parking space behind them, its lights filling the car before the driver switched them off. Clyde reached forward and pressed the starter button.

"Let's get out of here," he said. "I'll explain . . ."

Tears blinded her and she reached for the door handle. Dimly she realized that Mrs. Schultz, who lived in the apartment across the hall from her, was in the doorway struggling with an umbrella. Two men were getting out of the car that had parked behind

Clyde's. Someone else walked down the street toward them—Mr. Claybottom, the apartment manager.

Clyde grasped her wrist.

"Come on," he said tensely. "We'll talk this out. Let's get out of here. *Come on!*"

She pulled away from him. "Leave me alone! Haven't you done enough? *I—I should kill you!*"

She heard Mrs. Schultz gasp. The two men looked at her curiously. Mr. Claybottom stopped and stared at her.

"*Come on!*" Clyde said. Panic came over her. It seemed that Mrs. Schultz's eyes, Mr. Claybottom's, the two men's, were all the eyes of the world looking at her, accusing her.

Somehow the car door was closed and they were out in the west hills. Neither spoke. The windshield-wiper clacked a little wearily as they climbed a hill. Clyde turned into the abandoned dirt side road where they had parked so many times before.

* * *

"Just a moment," Paul Gram said. "You quarreled again. You say you got out of the car and ran back to the main road. He didn't follow you?"

"He didn't follow me. Near the turn-off another car was parked. A couple was in it. They must have seen me. Maybe there were other couples parked near there."

"We haven't found the couple. Nor any couple."

"But . . ."

"You say you walked home from there."

"Yes."

"Alice . . . you knew the gun was in the glove compartment. You said you'd seen it there."

"Yes."

"And you got it out and shot him with it. That was the gun, Alice. You said you wore gloves that you lost on the way home. There would be no prints. Nothing for other tests. You shot him and ran, Alice. You'll never beat this. We have too much. Why don't you admit it?"

"I didn't kill him."

"Mrs. Schultz and Claybottom heard your threats. They say you looked as if you *would* kill him!"

"I told Mrs. Schultz his name one day. It was a mistake. She didn't approve of me after she saw him leave late one night."

"You killed him, Alice."

"No."

"Tell me the truth."

"Are you married, Lieutenant?"

"Yes."

"And you have children?"

"Three."

"Ask you wife if . . . if she could have killed you . . . when . . . when you were engaged . . . when you were . . ."

"All right, Alice. I'm going to let you get some sleep."

"I didn't kill him."

"That reason you gave me—I'm going to ask Sue. But spurned love's been the motive for murder a good many times, Alice."

"Not . . . not for all women."

"I don't know. I'm going to call a matron and let you get some sleep."

"Thank you."

"What did he say just before he died, Alice?"

"Lieutenant . . . I didn't kill him. I'm tired. I can't think. You've asked me a hundred times. Things are getting mixed up. But I didn't kill him. Whatever you say . . . whatever you think . . . I didn't kill him . . . I didn't kill him . . . I didn't kill him . . . I didn't kill him . . ."

"We'll talk again tomorrow."

"I didn't kill him . . ."

* * *

A morning bird's song came cheerfully into the Gram bedroom. A truck stopped outside and there was the sound of milk bottles being handled. Paul Gram watched pre-dawn cast a grayness over the ceiling.

Sue Gram spoke very softly again. "But it's so hard for me to know, Paul. It was different. I was in love, too, but there was the ring and security and knowing I was yours and you were all mine."

"I guess it's a hypothetical question that doesn't get answered. A shot in the dark by a scared kid. Women's minds work in odd patterns sometimes."

"Don't you see what I mean? She's—well, sort of innocent. She doesn't think in terms of 'having been around,' or 'knowing what it's all about.' From what you say, I think she was honestly and humbly in love with the heel."

"That's quite a description of a gal who's just murdered a man!"

"You asked me, Mr. Policeman. I didn't

volunteer. You asked me the question and if I didn't know you're tired and really trying to do the right thing, I'd run you out of bed for being belittling!"

He chuckled. "Okay. Just for the record, and so I can stay in bed and get some shut-eye—what's the answer to my question? The one she said to ask you."

"The answer, I think, depends upon whether a woman wants the *man* or what the man *has*. If she wants the man, I don't see why she'd kill him!"

"Revenge."

"She still wanted the man, Copper! Now go to sleep or I'll never get you up."

"This is a hell of a job, Sue."

"I'm glad you feel that way about it. If you didn't, you wouldn't be such a swell man for a husband—and a cop."

SIX hours of sound sleep had helped a lot but finding John Pierney of the District Attorney's staff in his office made Paul Gram tired all over again. Gram greeted the authoritative young man with a political smile.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Up most of the night on the Downey case."

"That's why I'm here," Pierney said. He was short and thin and certain. "Looks like you're wrapped it up. We think we'll get an indictment and conviction without trouble. There's no doubt that she killed him."

"Circumstantial."

Pierney smiled deprecatively. "It won't sound circumstantial by the time the Old Man gets through with it."

Gram found a battered pipe in a desk drawer, filled it, and lit it as he glanced over the papers spread on his desk.

"Did you know Downey?" he asked.

"Not well. He'd been practicing in Los Angeles."

"Oh? But he's from here, isn't he?"

Pierney nodded. "Came home with enough to retire."

"Good lawyer?"

"Mouthpiece, some called him."

Gram's eyebrows went up. "Mouthpiece?"

"He defended Phil Ris and some other L.A. mobsters who took a rap down there. He lost this last time—but it was the first time. Guess he decided to quit while he still had dough."

Gram studied his briar. "Wasn't there some talk that he laid down on the job with

Ris this last time? Seems I remember something about it, but didn't connect that Downey with our dead boy."

"That was the talk. Some say that's why he came back here. Some of the boys were a little peeved by the way he handled the case. And some say he managed to get away with a nice piece of change—with Ris out of the way. Hidden dough, property, and one thing and another that Downey handled for him. Having Ris behind bars made it convenient for him—especially as the sentence was life."

Thoughtfully, Gram said, "But a man like Ris would have pals."

"Undoubtedly. In fact a couple have been seen around here lately. Mike Tjaljo and Ike Listich."

"Downey's widow a California girl?"

"No. He married her here before he went down there ten years ago. Very attractive girl, but they didn't seem to get along well. Maintained separate apartments and that sort of thing."

"That's what I've heard."

"Well, I thought I'd check with you. I read the reports. It's practically enough for us to proceed." The smart young man got up to leave.

"We're still looking for evidence," Gram said. "We'll give you as good a case as we can."

"Thanks, Paul. I'll see you later."

After the attorney had left, Paul thoughtfully called the identification bureau. They said they had pictures on file of Mike Tjaljo and Ike Listich. They'd send them up immediately.

Gram hung up and dialed again. He asked for Sergeant Mike Judd.

In a few moments he and Judd studied the photographs of Tjaljo and Listich.

"Check on them," Gram said. "What they did last night. I'll talk with the woman."

Edith Downey admitted him to an expensive apartment. His chair gave him a view of the city, and across the room the woman watched him pleasantly. She was slim and attractive in skirt and sweater. If she suffered grief, it didn't show in her eyes.

"I'll make this brief, Mrs. Downey."

She nodded. "Naturally you have questions. I was just reading the news stories."

"The girl told us you saw her."

The nod again. "Perhaps a little foolishly. I told her that Clyde was married. Obvi-

ously—and as I suspected—she didn't know. But then, I had no illusions about Clyde. And I wanted to break that up. To protect myself—and . . . well, to protect her. My husband, Lieutenant, was somewhat of a heel."

"That's what I've gathered. Incidentally, do you know a man named Tjaljo . . . or one named Listich?"

"I know who they are. My husband was afraid of them. It was something to do with his defense of Phil Ris."

"Why?"

"I knew very little of what Clyde was doing. We were separated. When he decided to return here, I decided to come, too. This is my home. And, frankly, I've felt a need to keep my eye on him. There was the matter of my support."

"But you knew why he was afraid of those two men?"

"He came to my apartment down there one night. He said he didn't want to return to his—that those two men blamed him for Ris's conviction and thought he had concealed some of Ris's wealth. They were trying to get it and even the score for Ris."

"Do you think they killed him?"

She regarded him thoughtfully. "I don't like to say this—I feel sorry for her—but I think Alice Meadows probably had very good reason to kill him—knowing Clyde. I doubt that Tjaljo or Listich had anything to do with it."

"Why not?"

"Well—for one thing, wouldn't they have used their own guns?"

He rubbed his chin and finally nodded. "That's good reasoning," he admitted. "And thanks for your help."

She went to the door with him.

"Will you let me know?" she asked.

"It's only a matter of time." He thanked her again and left the building, thinking that the two California men could be smart enough not to use their guns—to plant a rap on Alice Meadows. Perhaps Judd would have news.

JUDD had news. "Mrs. Schultz and that guy Claybottom identified them as the men who got out of the car parked behind Downey's."

Gram's eyes brightened. "Pick 'em up!"

Judd smiled. "Ahead of you, Boss! I got 'em on ice downstairs."

"Let's see them."

Tjaljo and Listich dressed like insurance salesmen, but their eyes had no friendliness. They sat in Gram's office and watched him with attentive politeness.

Gram said, "You followed Downey to an apartment house last night. A girl started to get out of his car after you parked behind him and then stayed in—after some quarreling. We have two witnesses who saw you."

Tjaljo nodded. He was tan and young and confident. "So you want to know if we followed Downey when he pulled out. Right?"

"Yes."

"When we heard that girl say she ought to kill him—and she looked like she would—we thought an alibi would be handy. We made sure we had one."

"Thoughtful."

"Just careful."

"Okay. What's the alibi?"

Tjaljo glanced at Listich. They smiled a little.

"We hadn't had dinner," Tjaljo said, "so we picked that place across from headquarters where you cops hang out. We had steaks. We told the counterman we thought his clock was slow and furnished a nickel for him to call the time number. His clock was right. He'll remember. After we ate we played his pinball machine until he closed."

Gram reached for a telephone and dialed. The counterman was off shift, but happened to be there. They'd send him right over.

No one spoke while they waited. The counterman came in and nodded his bald head at Gram and Judd.

"Ever see these two birds?" Gram asked.

"Sure, Paul. In the joint last night. Had me catch the time. Eight-ten, it was. They stayed until I closed at two, playin' the pinball machine."

Gram sighed. "Okay, Bill. Thanks."

The California men exchanged smiles again.

"Satisfied?" asked Listich.

"You can go."

"We've got two guns in the car. If you want to check slugs that killed him against our guns, that's okay, too. We're clean."

"Get out. Beat it."

The men smiled again and left.

Judd stretched. "Nice try, Boss. We start again on Alice?"

"Yes."

Judd started for the door and suddenly

Gram stared at him, his memory jogged.

"Mike! Bring me every morning paper you can find! Quick!"

A half hour later he shoved them aside and smiled at Judd.

"Come on," he said. "I'll need you."

Edith Downey had changed to a street suit. She looked a little impatient when she saw Paul Gram at her door.

"I'll only take a moment," Paul said. He introduced Judd.

"I'm interested in your theory about Tjaljo and Listich not being the killers," Gram said. "Maybe you can clear up a point or two."

She looked puzzled. "I don't see how I can help. I only said that they'd probably use their own guns."

Gram nodded. "That's what I wanted Judd to hear you say. That makes two of us."

"But what . . . ?"

"How do you know that it wasn't one of their guns? I checked the papers. It's not in any story. In fact, I haven't released information about the gun. The statement I finally made this morning—which didn't mention the gun—was too late to make a morning edition. The papers carried only overnight stories about the murder and arrest. I wasn't sure myself about the gun until after one o'clock this morning. How do you know it wasn't one of their guns?"

"Why . . . I . . ."

"You know because you used his gun to kill him. You followed them. The car Alice saw was yours. She assumed there was a couple in it. When she ran away, you went up there. I don't know what was said, but it ended in your killing him."

"Why should I kill Clyde?"

"To make certain you'd get his money. It's probably plenty if rumors are true—a big slice of Ris's. And you made sure you'd get it—pinning the murder on Alice Meadows. You ran too much risk of losing him and the money if he lived. He restricted your life too much. He wanted a divorce. I'll probably find witnesses to prove you stayed parked near the apartment last night and saw what happened there."

"You can't—"

"I think we can. Your car tires probably have soil on them from that muddy side-road. That, along with what you've admitted about the gun, should do it. We want a paraffin test of your hands for powder residue. You've already admitted too much."

"You're very clever, Lieutenant. But after I left her place I called on Judge Ramsey and Mrs. Ramsey. I was his secretary when I met my husband. Mrs. Ramsey is an invalid and always home. I'm very fond of them. I stayed quite late."

Gram went to the telephone and called the Ramsey residence. His questions were polite and brief and to the point. He frowned as he hung up.

Judd looked at him. Gram nodded. "She was there."

"Then you won't need me?" the woman smiled.

"I'll find you if I do," Gram said.

OUTSIDE Gram and Judd sat in their parked car. Gram's eyes were narrowed in thought. Judd stared morosely at passing traffic. "Maybe we been wrong," Judd said. "It looks like Alice."

"She was ready to leave."

"She . . . ? Oh, you mean the Downey dame?"

AMAZING THING! By Cooper

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Gram nodded. "Maybe she's spotted us. We'd better move."

He drove around the block and parked down the avenue where they could watch the door.

Ten minutes passed. She came out and walked to a blue coupe. The detectives pulled into traffic behind her.

"What's this buy us?" Judd said.

"I'm not sure. Maybe it's a hunch."

Edith Downey drove swiftly and expertly. They threaded into downtown traffic and she swerved to the front of a hotel. A man got into the car.

Judd swore softly. Gram nodded. "Tjaljo. She took a chance."

"She's taking another, kissing him in this traffic," Judd said. "What makes?"

"They figure we've lost interest in them. No reason to tail 'em."

"I still don't get the pitch."

"Those alibis were too damned pat," Gram said.

He parked at a drug store and found a telephone booth.

He looked grim when he returned to the car. "Remember that counterman?"

"Bill Crowley? Sure. He's been in that joint a couple of years."

"Know where he was before that?"

Judd shook his head.

"I found out. San Quentin, doing time. He worked for Ris until they caught him rolling a customer in back of the place."

"Things begin to add."

"To a nice answer," Gram nodded.

It was a dilapidated rooming house. They found Bill Crowley packing two cheap suitcases.

"Going somewhere?" Gram asked.

"I got a new job in California."

"Who got the job for you?"

"I—well, I just heard about it."

"Tjaljo and Listich?"

"Who?"

"How much did they pay you to set up their alibis?"

"Look, Paul, I don't get this. You know me and—"

"Because you've served me coffee and sandwiches a couple of years? And don't 'Paul' me. You're coming to headquarters."

"Hell, Lieutenant. I got a train to catch. I haven't the least idea what you're—"

"How much dough are you carrying?"

"Why . . . I got a little."

"We'd better take a look." Gram nodded to Judd and the sergeant moved toward the small, bald-headed man.

Crowley drew back. "I been lucky with the ponies."

Gram's lips tightened. "And we've had some guys rolled lately."

Crowley blanched. "You can't pin no rap on me! I'm a two-time loser. If you tag me for another rap I'll—"

"You'll spend a hell of a long time in the big house."

"I didn't do nothing."

"I'm doing this the nice way, Crowley. I can be tough."

Crowley sat on the unmade bed in the room and stared at the suitcases.

"Yeah," he said finally. "I got no out."

"They paid you to alibi them?"

"One grand. They had it rigged for several days, waiting for the right time."

"And they didn't come in the joint when you said?"

"No. They came a lot later."

"Let's go to headquarters. You can dictate a statement there."

Attorney John Pierney was enjoying himself. He sat behind his desk and looked at Edith Downey, then at Listich and Tjaljo. Gram and Judd sat in the background.

He said, "Lieutenant Gram informs me that laboratory men have identified soil from your car, Tjaljo. It's from that road where you murdered Downey. Crowley has confessed that you paid him for an alibi. I've already reviewed that and the rest that Gram has. We have plenty for a conviction."

Edith Downey spoke. "I don't see what I have to do with this!"

"Didn't you help them plan it? You and Tjaljo are obviously on better-than-speaking terms. You couldn't afford to give your husband divorce evidence—you'd lose the money he was paying you. And sooner or later he'd catch up with you and Tjaljo."

"So what?"

"It would be much simpler if your husband died and left you his estate—including the Ris money rumored to be involved. Tjaljo and Listich came here for a specific reason. You found it convenient to help them by telling of your husband's habits and actions—how Alice Meadows could be involved. Of course, Tjaljo may have persuaded you to help."

(Please continue on page 113)

THE BRUTE

By R.
VAN TAYLOR

"You go over
and wait by his
car," Hank said.



Luke's continued talk-talk-talk to Pa and Little Davy got on Hank's nerves something fierce. How could Luke expect them to answer from the depths of their graves?

HANK PUTMAN guessed that maybe a lot of people thought he was crazy, but he knew different. There are two ways of getting something that isn't for sale. You can work and work until it finally becomes yours, or you can kill for it. In this case killing wouldn't have done any good, so Hank just worked. But the work was killing him.

After wiping beads of sweat from his face, he cracked leather across the backs of two mules and grabbed the handles of

the plow. The shining sharp blade bit into the black earth, turning up big clods of fresh dirt. It was nearing sundown and soon he would be finished. Every muscle in his lanky body sagged wearily like the beat-up straw hat that was pulled down squarely over his grim, hawk-like face. His grimy hands matched his faded-blue overalls. And the smell of fresh, new soil spurred him on.

So did the thought that this land would some day be his.

Since Ruby's husband had died six months ago, Hank had worked and sweated and slaved for her. He had neglected his own place to help her out, although God knew he was glad to get away from Ma and Luke every day. He didn't want any pay for his labors. He was shooting for much higher stakes. This land of Ruby's was the finest in the country—ten times better than the pile of rocks that was his own farm. This land was what he wanted, and he meant to have it.

That was why he came over here every day to work. He wanted to show Ruby how much she needed him and how much he could do for her. Of course, after he got her and the land she could go to hell as far as he was concerned. She was awfully pretty, though. Be real nice to have around. He might let her stay around until he got tired of her.

Suddenly Hank jerked the team to a stop. His eyes narrowed as he peered towards a pine grove at the end of the field. Cursing, he hurled the reins down and ran in that direction. It was hard running over the plowed ground and when he reached the edge of the field his breath was coming in deep gasps.

"Luke!" he shouted.

He stood looking into the pine trees. Nothing moved.

"I know you're behind that big pine. Come out from there!"

Like a child, Luke stepped from behind the tree. He was a giant in tattered shirt and trousers—and mind. Snickering, he said, "I—I didn't think you'd see me if I came through the woods."

"Get on back to the house."

"No! I come over to sneak a look at pretty Ruby. I won't go until I do. You can't make me go."

"You ain't goin' to do no such thing. Now get!"

Luke was pouting. He reached down and picked up a big stick from the ground. It was a good three inches in thickness. "I'm goin' to see her. I might even get close enough to touch her."

Automatically Hank took a step backwards. "All right! If you do I'll tell Pa and Little Davy."

Fear exploded in Luke's eyes. "No! Don't do that, Hank. They're mad enough at me as it is. They might not talk to me

if they get any madder, and I've got to talk with them so they won't be mad."

"Okay. I won't tell them about this if you'll go home."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Big tears started to form in Luke's eyes. He snapped the stick between his fists as if it were a match. Then he turned around and lumbered into the woods.

Hank watched him disappear with contempt. You see, Pa and Little Davy had been dead for several months.

HANK had seen the black-and-white sedan sitting in front of Ruby's house as he came in from the field with the mules. He saw her and Jim Goss, the deputy sheriff, on the weather-beaten porch. They were standing close together. Too close.

Leaving the mules in the weedy yard, he walked towards them. Jim Goss viewed him with cool indifference. The deputy was tall and straight in his neat khakis, wore a pair of fancy boots and had a brand-new white Stetson. Hank spat on the ground. He wasn't much on clothes.

When he stepped upon the sagging boards of the porch, Ruby frowned at him and said gayly, "Hank, you're just covered with dirt. Why don't you learn to stay clean and proper like Jim, here?"

Damn Jim Goss, Hank thought. What did he want to hang around here for? He hadn't done any work.

"Wake up, Hank," Ruby said. "You look like you're in a dream. Maybe that sun was a little too hot on you this afternoon."

Lifting an arm to his streaming face, Hank wiped away the sweat and stole a penetrating glance at Ruby. She was young and pretty, and the smooth curves of her plump body pushed revealingly against the thin cloth of her cotton dress. Yes, with both her and the land he'd be a very fortunate man.

Jim shifted, and his shadow fell across Ruby. Sullenly Hank dropped his eyes and said, "I've seen it cooler."

"Hank's been the kindest thing to me," Ruby declared. "Almost every day he comes over here to work. If it hadn't of been for him, this place would have gone to seed. And do you want to know something else?" Ruby smiled and nodded at

Hank. "He won't let me pay him a cent. Ain't that nice of him?"

"Yes, ain't it," Jim said flatly.

Hank shifted uneasily. The expression on Jim's face told him that Jim knew he wasn't over here working for his health. But Jim didn't have any rights to her or the land. He hadn't worn any blisters on his hands.

"Look over there," Ruby said, pointing her arm. "Hank worked all day plowing that field. I wasn't even goin' to bother with it, but Hank said it ought to be done. So this mornin' he brought his mules over and lit in on it. He's the workingest man I ever saw—always seems to know what needs to be done."

Sure he knew, Hank thought. He'd have to do something about Jim Goss. But what?

Ruby sighed and continued, "I'm the most helpless person in the world. Without someone to help me I'd just rot down like this old shack. I guess I need a man to take care of me."

She smiled at Jim, and Jim smiled back. Hank tensed, then suddenly grew weak all over as he said, "If it's a man you're needin', Ruby, I'd be much obliged if you married me."

It was just a slight movement, but Ruby flinched. Hank was certain that she did. For a second the whole world seemed to stand still.

Jim broke the spell of awkward silence. "How's Luke, that halfwitted brother of yours, Hank? Is he still talking to dead people?"

Hank set his jaws firmly.

"You won't have to put up with him much longer," Jim went on. "After his sanity hearing next week he'll probably be sent to the state hospital. That'll sure be a load off you and your ma, won't it?"

"He ain't much trouble," Hank mumbled. Squinting his eyes at the low, red sun he added, "It's gettin' close to sundown. Reckon I'd better be headin' for home. You leavin' Jim?"

"No. I'm staying here at Ruby's for supper."

Ruby flushed and said, "I'd of asked you to stay, too, Hank, but I knew that you had to go home."

"Yeah—that's right. I've got to go."

"Wait a minute," Jim said, catching him by the arm. "I've got something I want to

tell you before you leave. You may not be bothered much longer with all these extra chores and work. If I can talk Ruby into it, tonight, she'll not be without a man any longer. That'll sure be a load off your shoulders, won't it? Better wish me luck."

Hank jerked away and left.

THE streaked sky had turned blood-red as Hank drove his team down the rutted road that led to his farm three-quarters of a mile away. His stooped frame trudged wearily behind the bony creatures, leaving a trail of dust that lazily sprang to life and then slowly drifted and settled into death again. Everything reminded Hank of death. There was death in the tall fallen pines and in the stench from the swamp and in the slowly circling buzzards in the distance. The thought of death seeped into Hank's pounding heart and made it cruel and wicked. . . .

When he arrived home, he left the mules standing outside and moped into the dark, crumbling house. In the kitchen he found Ma pulling a bread pan from the oven of an ancient stove. Her hair was white and tangled and her thin body bent. Tossing the hot pan onto a scarred table, she glowered at Hank and said, "'Bout time you're showin' up. My life ain't been livable since you took a notion to have that land of Ruby's."

Hank motioned for her to be quiet. "Shut up. Do you want Luke to hear you? You know what happens every time he gets to thinking about her."

"Don't fret, sonny. He can't hear us. He's out talking to your dead pa and brother. I imagine he's having a right interestin' conversation."

Hank grunted and slouched down into a cane chair. Ma grabbed the edge of the table and peered down into his face. The corners of her thin mouth turned down as she asked, "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Tell them that Luke's crazy so they'd come and take him away."

"You're the one who's loony."

"No I ain't! Jim Goss was by here about an hour ago and said they were taking Luke to a hearin' next week. That's your doings, Hank, and let me tell you why you did it. You ain't got any money to buy that land and the only way you figure you

can get it is to marry Ruby, but you can't marry her as long as Luke's around. He's crazy mad about her and goes out of his head even when he hears her name, so you've got to get rid of him to carry out your plan. That's why you did it. You think more of that land that you do your own brother's soul!"

Hank wanted to change the subject. "What's for supper?"

"Cornbread and molasses."

Hank screwed up his face. "Can't we have somethin' decent to eat for a change?"

"Not as long as you spend all your time up the road. It's your fault if you haven't got anything to eat. You haven't hit a lick of work around this place for a month. But things will be different soon. Real soon."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I know something."

"What?"

Ma grimaced and leaned closer. "I know that if Ruby marries anyone, it'll be Jim Goss, and that it hasn't done you a bit of good to have your poor brother sent to the asylum or break your back workin' for her. That woman has put a spell on you and turned your heart black!"

Hank pushed to his feet. "Get supper on the table," he ordered harshly. "I'm goin' to get Luke."

THE light was fading rapidly and cast a ghostly hue over the weird scene that met Hank's eyes. At the foot of a huge, lifeless pine were two graves, reclaimed by nature and with their wooden markers half eaten away by insects. Luke was on all fours in the weeds, swaying back and forth like a wild animal and talking to the silent mounds of red earth.

Luke was saying in a woeful voice, "Tell him, Pa—tell Little Davy that I didn't mean to hurt him. It weren't my fault. He just made me mad. And you know what happens to my head when I get mad. It begins to hurt and throb and makes me do things I don't want to do. Tell him that, Pa. Ask him to forgive me. Little Davy's poutin' and he won't listen to me."

Twisting his massive head to one side, Luke listened with complete absorption. His wide eyes glowed mystically in the semi-darkness as he heard sounds that would never reach another human's ears. Jubilant-

ly he cried, "Do you hear Pa, Little Davy? He's on my side. He knows that I didn't mean to do it. Now, why don't you be friendly and—"

"Come on, Luke," Hank said sourly. "It's time for supper."

Luke gazed up at him and then slowly climbed to his feet, like a trained beast obeying his master. Hank felt no pity or sorrow for his confused brother, only disgust. He thought that Luke would be better off beside his brother and Pa. Then his mind slipped back to Jim Goss. Funny, but every time he thought of death it ended up there.

"I've got to go, now," Luke said to the graves. "I'll be back tomorrow and maybe you'll be feelin' better by then, Little Davy. Please don't stay mad at me."

"Come on, Luke, before I pick up a pine knot and whack you."

"I'm coming, Hank. Don't hit me."

Indifferently Hank turned and started back to the house. Luke followed, occasionally glancing back at the graves and mumbling to himself. When they entered the lamp-lit kitchen, they plopped down at the table and began stuffing their mouths with the cornbread and molasses Ma had placed there. The food choked Hank.

Ma wasn't eating, but sat and glared at Hank with mocking eyes and a twisted smile. He knew what she was thinking and he despised her for it. She was happy because he was unhappy, and she was so intent upon her own thoughts that she didn't even know Luke was at the table.

Sneering, Ma said, "Jim Goss ain't come back by. . . I guess he and Ruby must be havin' a big time."

Cornbread fell from Luke's gaping mouth. He rose to his feet, knocking the chair to the floor.

"You fool!" Hank snapped. "Now look what you've done. Luke, sit down!"

First shock and then fear crossed Ma's face. "I didn't mean to say it, Luke! I wasn't thinkin'!"

Luke was staring into a dream world of his own as his face twisted and quivered. Slowly his big fists grew into knots as he growled, "Ruby—pretty Ruby and Jim?"

"Stop him, Hank! He's out of his head! Make him sit down!"

Hank didn't move. He studied the jealous monster through narrowed eyes.

If he didn't get Luke calmed down he'd grow worse and worse, and if he got his hands on Jim Goss he'd kill him. If that happened Luke would be sure to be sent away for the rest of his life, and Jim Goss wouldn't be around any longer to cause trouble between him and Ruby. That way he could get rid of two birds with one murder.

"Help-me, Hank!" Ma cried. She had thrown her frail arms around Luke's heaving chest, trying to make him sit down.

"Leave him be," Hank said coldly.

Ma let go of Luke and looked at Hank. She grabbed the edge of the table to steady herself and bawled, "What are you thinkin' about? Why won't you make Luke sit down? Don't you know that—" Suddenly she grew pale and began trembling. "No! You wouldn't sic Luke onto Jim Goss?"

Hank came to his feet and moved to Luke's side. Placing his mouth to Luke's ear, he said, "Jim's hurtin' Ruby, Luke, so you'll have to hurt him."

Luke's eyes were ablaze. His big muscles tensed into knots of destruction.

Ma flung herself upon him. "Don't listen to your evil brother, son!"

"Ruby, Ruby, Ruby, Ruby!" Hank yelled.

Fleeing to a corner, Ma grabbed an axe and shouted, "I'd rather see him dead before I'd let him kill!"

"Ma's jealous of pretty Ruby," Hank told Luke.

She charged with the axe and swung down at Luke. Hank jerked Luke back and the axe chopped into the floor. Frantically Ma tried to bring it up again, but it was stuck. Luke struck at her with his big fist and knocked her to the floor.

"Good boy," Hank said. "Come on."

THE night was black as the two men journeyed to Ruby's on their lethal mission. With each step Hank took Jim Goss died another horrible death. He had died a thousand times in Hank's mind, but soon he would die for the last time. Permanently.

It was a perfect plan. He could murder Jim Goss without murdering him. Everybody knew about Luke's head, and that was all they needed to know. But it gave Hank real pleasure to know that he was killing Jim as surely as if he were doing it with his own hands.

Hank said, "Listen, Luke. I'm your friend. I'm goin' to help you kill Jim Goss, but you'll have to do what I say. I know the best way. Understand?"

"Sure, Hank. You're my friend."

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"Good. We're coming there now."

A weak beam of yellow light came from the window of Ruby's house. As they crept forward through the clinging weeds and tall grass, the glowing window seemed to have a hypnotic effect upon Hank. They were getting very close now, and Hank suddenly became wary and cautious. Dropping to his hands and knees, he tugged commandingly at Luke's ragged clothes. Luke kept stalking forward with Hank dragging behind.

"Down, you fool!" Hank hissed.

Luke stopped, convulsed with conflicting desires. Desperately Hank pulled and pulled, and finally Luke eased to the ground, confused and uncertain. Large beads of sweat began popping out on Hank's face. "I'm your friend," he whispered. "I know best."

A throaty animal sound came from Luke as he tossed his head up and down. Hank's heart began pounding and for the first time he began to fear his unstable brother. If Luke got out of control . . .

They crawled slowly and purposefully to the edge of the house, just below the window. Forcing Luke to stay down, Hank raised up carefully until he could see over the windowsill.

On the edge of an old sofa, Jim sat kissing Ruby. His handsome face was cupped in her soft hands as they lingered in embrace. For a brief second he imagined Jim in the final embrace of death—with Luke.

Cynically Hank turned away and whispered into Luke's ear, "Jim's in there with pretty Ruby. You go over and wait by his car. I'll go in and send him out. When he comes you kill him. Understand?"

Hank clapped his hand over Luke's growing mouth as his brother nodded in anxious agreement. As soon as Luke was quiet again, he led him to the car. Hank left him there and went up to the door of the house.

Without knocking he burst into the room. Jim sprang to his feet. "What the devil—"

"It's Luke!" Hank cried, taking in great gasps of air, as if he had been running. "He's gone, Jim, and he's plumb out of his head! No tellin' where he is or what he might do!"

Ruby's hand went to her throat, and Jim said excitedly, "That's bad! Have you

got any idea which way he was heading?"

"No. But we'd better find him fast!"

Jim grabbed his hat from the bed and started for the door. "I'll get some men and we'll start a search." At the door he paused and studied Hank doubtfully. Then he said, "You'd better stay here with Ruby until I get back. Just in case."

Hank fought back with a smile. "Yeah—I'll do that."

Jim left and Hank stared at the door for a moment, feeling contempt for him because he was so easily fooled.

Ruby said in a frightened voice, "Do you think they'll find Luke?"

She had moved from the sofa and was standing by his side. Her closeness had taken him unawares because he had been thinking of other things. He said, "Don't be afraid, Ruby. I'm here to protect you. I'll protect you all your life if you'll let me."

He reached for her and pulled her into her arms. A frown crossed Ruby's face, and she tried to push away. Hank squeezed tighter.

"Let go of me, Hank! You're hurtin' me!"

Ruby squirmed and tried to get away. Then Hank heard something that caused him to let her go, except for a vise-like grip on her wrist.

The engine of Jim's car sprang to life and the gears whined as it sped away.

A tremor of doubt passed through Hank as he wondered what it meant. Why weren't there screams? And why . . .

Ruby cried, "Please let go! You're hurtin'! Hurtin'!"

Glass shattered into the room as Luke's big foot came through the window. Hank dropped Ruby's wrist, paralyzed with fear. Screaming, Ruby ran to the door and disappeared. With the cunning of a panther, Luke cut off Hank's escape.

Backing away, Hank pleaded, "No, Luke! I'm your friend! I'm your brother!"

But Luke, snarling and white with rage, kept coming—coming. And Hank knew that his brother, his brother who talked to dead people, would soon be saying, "*Make him listen to me, Pa and Little Davy. Tell Hank that I didn't mean to hurt him!*"

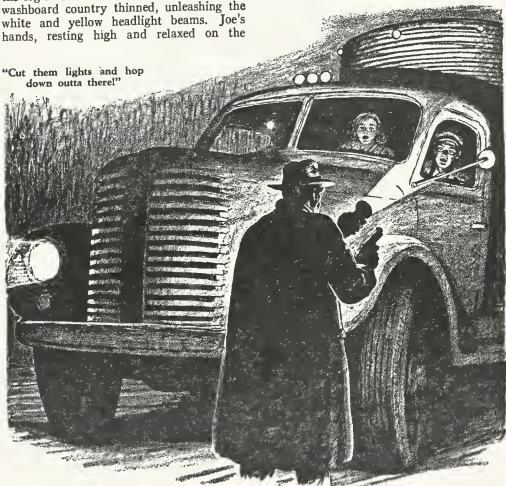
*Joe roared down the highway to exact his own vengeance—
for a hijacked truck and his kidnapped wife.*

DANGER— DOOM AHEAD!

JOE BRADLEY shifted from fifth gear to fourth as the grade cut the tractor-trailer's speed to forty. As he climbed, the fog in the wooded hollow of this devil's-washboard country thinned, unleashing the white and yellow headlight beams. Joe's hands, resting high and relaxed on the

By **STUART
FRIEDMAN**

"Cut them lights and hop
down outta there!"



wheel, tightened involuntarily as he saw the black sedan parked with lights out on the ridge above. Marti, his wife, sat forward on the seat beside him and peered intently.

"Joe, you think that's the same car?"

"No," he lied, shifting into third. Shortly after leaving Junction Truck Stop a half hour ago, a black sedan had begun to tail them. When it had passed, it had stayed abreast of the tractor, as if looking him over, for several hundred yards. Then, about a mile back, the same sedan had been parked on a ridge like this one. At that time there had been traffic coming in both directions. Now there wasn't a glimmer of headlights and at four in the morning there wasn't likely to be.

Joe could feel without checking the speedometer that his speed was down to twenty and shifted into second. His eyes, dark with anger and apprehension, stared steadily at the sedan. If its occupants meant trouble they were in the spot for it, because Joe's sixty-three thousand pounds of gross weight would be moving at a crawl on the crest.

He wished now that he hadn't taken this secondary road, but he'd got word back at Junction Truck Stop that the state police were weighing every big truck on the main highways. He was loaded above this state's legal limit, but he'd figured he could be across the state line in a couple of hours on this route. Taking the main highway would have meant a tough fine—maybe as much as two-hundred-and-fifty bucks.

Marti fished nervously in the slant pockets of her mackinaw, put two cigarettes in her mouth and scuffed a match aflame. Under a pert, white-knit stocking cap her round, babyish face puckered earnestly as she lighted. She put one of the cigarettes in his mouth.

"It was all a gamble anyway, wasn't it, Joe?" she said.

They were thirty yards from the crest, moving in first gear at ten miles an hour and losing speed every second. Her voice was nearly lost in the roar of the powerful engine and the heavy whine of the transmission.

"Becoming an independent contractor was a gamble and risking carrying an overload for Mr. Elton—so he'd appreciate it and give you that swell contract—was a gamble and taking this route was a gamble, and . . ."

"Don't be scared, baby," Joe broke in. She sounded as if she were rallying to a bat-

tle cry. *And dammit, Joe thought, the kid has something better than a battle coming to her on this trip of trips.*

Marti had never come with him before. They'd postponed her first ride till it could be a victory run in their own rig. He reached over and gripped her hand. This was second honeymoon and celebration rolled into one, and it was supposed to be the fulfillment of a dream for her, not a nightmare.

"Listen, honey, I think it's only a bunch of drunks in that sedan," Joe told her. "But it might be some tinhorn racketeers. Sometimes if they get an independent out on a limb somewhere they shake him down. They probably figure I'm on this back road because I want to keep out of the cops' way, so I'm easy game. A hundred bucks will pay them off, chances are—at the worst. And, Marti, I'm paying it—because this is your trip and there's not going to be any trouble for you to get scared about. See?"

"Sure, Joe. It's probably like you say. Drunks."

Marti was young and pretty, and when they'd got married she'd wanted doll-up clothes and the fun that went with them—plus a home with all the gadgets, including a well-stocked nursery. Marti had wanted everything and all at once and right now! All Joe had ever wanted, except Marti, was his own truck. So she had taken over his dream, lock, stock and barrel. She'd kept her job and got grim about it. For three years they'd held to the single goal of getting a three thousand-buck down payment for Joe's dream.

Most of Joe's patience was reserved for the road and sometimes he'd damn the bankbook and splurge on fun and gifts for her. Marti would reproach him, but with a look of contentment in her soft eyes because he loved her more than he loved a truck.

When she, in her turn, would give way to some extravagance, she would suffer noisily about it in an embarrassingly foolish way. She'd beg forgiveness, but she wouldn't accept it, calling herself weak, cheap, worthless and what not. She'd carry on for hours, making him baby her and force her to see how wonderful she was. Afterwards, when she'd nearly exhausted him, she'd eat like a glutton, looking as fresh and happy as a cherub.

YESTERDAY Marti had got her first glimpse of their new truck. The big, beautiful, eighteen-wheel, fifty foot-long sleeper truck and aluminum, refrigerated semi had been loaded and ready to roll its first thousand miles to New York. She had stood beside him reading the huge, blue, block letter legend: *JOMAR TRUCKING COMPANY*.

Joe had warned her gruffly not to make a spectacle in front of the gang of truckers gathered at the terminal to wish him luck. Marti had turned to look in his face and suddenly she had exploded with laughter, doubling forward and howling. Then she'd flung her arms around him. Of course it had been ridiculous because he'd been the one to make a spectacle, what with his eyes filling and a couple of tears sliding down his face.

Now, on the crest ahead, Joe saw the doors of the sedan open. Three overcoated figures moved swiftly onto the pavement like shadows transformed into ominous solids by the flood of Joe's lights. Two of them, narrow men moving at a wary crouch, carried double-barrelled shotguns. They took up positions on either side of the road, guns at the ready, squinting at the truck under low hat-brims. The third, who was short and wide, planted his keglelike figure astride the center-line like a grotesque pigmy colossus, holding a revolver and a lighted flashlight.

When the truck was twenty feet from him, he began to make sweeping motions with the flashlight. He opened his mouth, showing dull glints of gold teeth, and belowed something that was lost under the roar of Joe's engine. But the meaning of the flashlight signals was clear. He was ordering the truck to turn to the right, off the road.

Joe's speed was down to a ponderous, intolerably slow crawl. He glanced at Marti and reached past her to make sure her door was locked. She was so rigid that the truck's massive vibration ran through her small body in a rough current, shaking her helplessly.

"It'll rattle your teeth out. Relax, baby."

"I'm trying to. Oh, Joe! Those guns."

"The guns are part of the pressure, that's all. They threaten to shoot up all the tires. I'm going to kick through to save my half of the tires," he said. "As co-owner, Marti,

will you authorize contribution for your half of the tires?"

"Joe, please! All I ask is don't be funny!"

Joe watched the stubby man with the flashlight and revolver. He turned his head, his mouth opened and chopped shut. The narrow, crouching figure on the left side of the road sprang toward Joe's side of the cab, cutting through the flood of headlights into the dimmer glow. He trained the shotgun on Joe's side window, backing slowly with the truck's movement. Joe leaned instinctively away from the window, his heart doubling a beat, his breath stopping. He began to twist the steering wheel to the right.

The faint tracks of a little-used road ran out along the ridge from the highway through a sparse woods. The man with the flashlight trotted ahead of the truck along one of the tracks, his dark overcoat flapping against his short legs. He twisted around every few steps to motion Joe on.

The men with the shotguns paced alongside the cab, covering both doors. Two hundred feet from the highway the man in front turned and thrust an outspread palm toward the truck. As Joe threw on the air brakes, he came trotting back. The one with the shotgun began to bang the muzzle against Joe's door.

"Cut them lights! Hop down outta there, fast."

The man on Marti's side was trying to open her door. Joe cranked down his window.

"I'll talk from here."

"Mac told you to cut them lights," the one with the shotgun said, his voice a querulous whine.

Mac, the short one, spoke for himself, his deep voice hoarse and gritty. "Cut them lights and hop down outta there or Freddy'll blast your damn head off."

He was the real goods, a very tough baby. Freddy, slanting the pair of shotgun barrels up at him, was almost the real goods. *The difference is*, Joe thought, *that Freddy couldn't stand as much tension*. He kept shooting glances toward the highway, as if afraid of being spotted by a truck or car, though there was no traffic in sight. Freddy would shoot at the shadow of a threat.

Joe switched off the trailer's system of running lights, the headlights and finally the dash lights. Mac's flashlight slanted up

through the window, catching Joe's head, throwing its enlarged shadow over Marti's face. He was acutely aware of her fingers locked to the sleeve of his leather jacket.

"Mac has to impress his underlings by making me come down to his level to deal. He wouldn't shoot. He wants dough. Sit tight!"

The idling engine rocked them gently. She bobbed her head in a little nod. Her wide, mute stare held to him as her fingers released his sleeve. Joe wanted to pull her stocking cap down over her eyes and muss her curly brown hair, but he knew he couldn't put the playfulness across. More than anything he wanted to kiss her, but he thought it would make things seem worse and frighten her more.

Joe swung around on the seat and flung the door open. He took a deep drag from his cigarette and let it fall to the ground, then jumped lightly down out of the cab. Mac and Freddy backed off a couple of paces. Mac kept the flashlight aimed in his eyes. Joe groped back of him for the door and slammed it shut. He faced the pair and said:

"O. K., Mac. What's the deal?"

He wasn't sure the words left his mouth. He heard and saw a flicking view of the third man's stealthy approach. The stock of a shotgun swung like a bat at his head. His senses outpaced his action so far that he thought he'd ducked the blow. His skull seemed to split. He felt his neck wrench as his head slammed toward his shoulder.

Another blow crashed against the back of his head. He felt his body pitch toward the ground and tried to get his hands up to break the fall. The breath and strength went out of him, leaving only a terrible nausea and numbness. Marti's scream sounded, sudden and raw above the engine's muted thunder.

THE thunder grew louder, rolling nearer like boulders across a slack drumhead which grew more and more taut. Then, as if the piling weight had burst the straining gut of the drumhead, there was a *crack*! Joe snapped alert, heart pounding, senses raw with the violent shock of waking. He stared from where he lay, propped on one elbow, toward a tree a hundred feet away, still smoldering from a strike of lightning. Real lightning, real thunder, real rain!

He lay on muddy ground halfway down a wooded slope. Through bare branches he saw the desolate gray sky of daylight. Cold rain drove straight down in a steady drone. Joe tried to get up, and his feet slipped from under him. He caught the trunk of a small tree higher on the slope and pulled himself half erect. A chill ran over his body and pain struck the back of his head like a fist-driven lance. He clung limply to the tree, resting his wet, bare head against it, his body trembling. He shut his eyes and breathed exhaustedly through his open mouth.

His slack lips formed Marti's name silently. His head shot up. He spun about and scanned the area frantically. He went lower on the slope and then to the right and to the left along the flank, searching. He charged up the hill, body doubled forward, shoes gouging and slipping in the mud, his hands snatching holds on the trees. He reached the top and ran to the roadway. The truck was gone. Marti was gone.

He went down the other side of the ridge, a wildness in his eyes, a numbing terror in him, fearing to find her, fearing not to find her. She was nowhere.

He went back onto the ridge. He peered to make sure this was where the truck had been. It was. The rain hadn't obliterated the deeply embedded tire prints. In seconds he made sure the truck hadn't gone farther along the ridge away from the highway. He ran out to the highway. He studied the tire marks where he had driven off the road, and where the truck had been backed out onto the highway again. The truck had gone west, back toward Junction Truck Stop.

He stared in both directions along the rolling, wet, empty highway, his eyes desperate. He heard the dim sound of a heavy engine through the drone of the rain, and stared at the next ridge. A westbound truck appeared, its headlights blurred and swollen through the downpour.

He clenched his fists at his sides and focussed his eyes painfully, trying to identify it as it sped downhill. It was a Seaboard-Great Lakes Diesel outfit. Joe knew most of the company's drivers in this division. He paced anxiously, oblivious of the pain in his head and the cold rain in his face. He watched the truck's tedious climb toward him and began to flag it down.

He and the driver, Ken Mattson, recognized each other. Ken braked, leaned across and flung open the right door.

"Climb aboard. What the hell happened, Joe?"

"Get me to the cops, Ken," Joe said hoarsely, climbing in. He slammed the door. "My wife's gone, Ken. They took her. Hijackers. Took my whole rig and Marti, too!"

"We'll highball it to Junction Truck Stop!" Ken released the air brakes and roared the big outfit into motion. "When'd it happen?"

"Little past four."

"Six-ten, now."

"I think this's the direction they went. But they might've gone east. Ken, did you see my rig east of here? It's new. Aluminum reefer semi and heavy tractor. We called it JOMAR TRUCKING COMPANY."

"JOMAR? No. I'd of spotted a name like that. You got your own rig now, huh?"

"Yeah. First trip in it." Joe spilled out the whole story as coherently as he could, and finished, "Ken, you ever run across a short, thick, tough baby like this Mac? Or Freddy?"

Ken, frowning gravely, keeping his eyes on the road, shook his head slowly. "No. You didn't get a good look at the third mug, huh? The one that clubbed you."

"Not a good one. But I'd know him. Medium tall, thin. They all wore plain business clothes, but one of them must've been a trucker to be able to tool my rig. I want to get word to all the drivers I can and get it spread out over the roads to all the truck stops and shipping terminals. Some trucker someplace is bound to know one or all of them—if any of them is a trucker."

"I'll brief everybody I can from here to Chi. I got buddies there who'll get the word to the west coast terminals. But hell, they only got a two-hour start. The cops'll have a teletype network around them in minutes! What were you hauling, Joe?"

"Elton Brand Frozen Foods."

"Oh-oh. Brand stuff like that has a helluva demand. Easy stuff to fence. What they probably did was run your rig into a crook warehouse in this area. Somewhere close, I'd say, maybe within fifty miles. They wouldn't keep your rig out in the open any longer than they had to."

"I guess I had this coming. I never should've risked carrying such an overload. If I hadn't been on this damned back road it wouldn't have happened."

"Aah, nuts! Who ain't overloaded sometimes? Half the trucks out of our terminal chance it every haul. It was the same with the Speed-Freight Trucks, when you were driving for them."

"I know. And Mr. Elton knew the score. He told me the consignment was heavy, in case I didn't want to chance a surprise weigh-in in this state. How would it look if I'd suddenly gone holy, and said: 'Sorry, Mr. Elton, I got to protect me first, you second.' He'd have played hell throwing business to JOMAR in the future if I couldn't come through for him on the very first job. Marti felt that way about it, too, and . . ."

"What's your wife like, Joe? I mean what's she look like?"

"Pretty. Little. Brunette. She was wearing—" Joe began to grind his teeth, the muscles of his throat aching tight, his face anguished.

"Hey, pal!" Ken cried. "Don't let it get you that way."

Joe pulled in a painful breath. "Gimme a dry smoke."

"Sure." Ken handed him cigarettes and matches. "Joe, why'n't you grab a blanket from the bunk back there and dry off and wrap up?"

Joe lighted, puffed nervously. "Never get colds." He handed back the cigarettes. His hand was shaking. He looked quickly away from Ken's anxious scrutiny. Then the words seemed to rip from his throat. "If you *knew* her, Ken, you'd know! I can't stand thinking about her. I'm half nuts with it!"

ABOUT forty trucks were in the parking area at Junction Truck Stop. Joe left Ken tooling into a spot near the road and ran for the low, square building that housed a dormitory, repair shop, restaurant, lounge and office. When he entered the lounge there was a familiar hub-bub of talk, juke music, the slaty voice of the intercom calling fuel charges against trucks from the outside pumps to the office. Joe crossed to the counter between office and lounge and took up the receiver from one of the phones. When the county operator answered, he said:

"Get me the State Police."

A group moodily smoking, gabbing, re-reading messages on the bulletin board while they waited for word from their dispatchers glanced curiously at Joe and eased toward him. Two drivers just in off the road, spilling the torrents of talk dammed up through lonely hours at their wheels, fell silent and came over.

Others, moving aimlessly about the lounge or in and out of the adjoining restaurant, or trying to fix edgy attention on magazines and comic books, focussed on Joe. Presently every trucker in the stop who was awake had come to share his trouble. They listened avidly, exchanging surprised and indignant glances while Joe told his story to the police.

When Joe hung up and said, "They're coming right over," the flood of questions and sympathy broke. Answering their questions and listening to the men's outrage, Joe felt a sense of well-being and surging hope. He felt more keenly than ever his camaraderie in this far-flung but closely knit world with its special language and shared problems. Ken came in and pointed out on the big wall map where he had found Joe. But no one had seen Marti or the truck, and none recalled a pair like Mac and Freddy.

"I'm going to see if the boys out at the pumps know anything," Joe said. He detached himself, crossed the lounge and went out.

The station, between the entrance and exit drives, commanded a view of the road. Both men had been on duty since midnight and remembered his JOMAR truck pulling out around three-thirty.

Phil, a bald, sporty old-timer, said emphatically, "The JOMAR didn't come back here. If it had come back down off the old road, it would either've had to stop out front there at the junction with the main highway or else turned in here. Whitey or me—one of us—would sure have spotted it in either case, Joe."

Whitey, a gangly tow-headed kid, nodded seriously. "The JOMAR didn't come back here, scratched his bald pate and went to peer through the back windows toward the parking area.

"There's a rig back there that came down off the old road a few minutes ago, since you and Ken Mattson pulled in. I don't know if he's grabbing some shuteye in his rig or if he went in the dorm. But why don't you see

him Joe? He might've passed your Jomar rig someplace on east."

Whitey said, "Yeah, he'd know. He said he hadn't made a stop for five hours. He asked me if the cops were still weighing out on the main highways. I told him they were still at it. So he griped and said he'd pull in and lay low here because he was heavy as hell."

"Which rig is it?" Joe said, going to the door. "I'll go talk to him."

"It's the green one," Whitey said, "fourth from the back end of the first line. B-Z-B EXPRESS."

"Thanks," Joe said, going out.

He hurried along the rain-spattered pavement to the back of the parking lot. He reached the rear of the big, green, B-Z-B semi-trailer, turned and went up to the tractor. He got a foot up on the high step to the cab, hoisted himself and peered into the murky interior. Seeing somebody in the hunk, he rapped on the window. The man stirred in his blankets, then sat up, reached forward and cranked the left door window down a few inches.

"What's the trouble, bud? I'm trying to get some sleep here."

"Sorry to bother you. I'm Joe Bradley. Phil and Whitey up at the pumps said you just came in off the old road. I was hijacked, and I wondered if you saw my rig. JOMAR TRUCKING COMPANY. Big, aluminum job. A reefer, like yours."

"Sorry, Bradley. No. I didn't pass it. You call the cops?"

"Yeah. I'll be getting back inside. I thought you might've known something."

"Hope you find it."

Joe headed back toward the building. He went inside out of the rain through the dorm entrance along the side. As he was shutting the door a hiss reached him. He recognized the sound of released air brakes. An instant later there was the low, explosive growl of a tractor's engine. Joe opened the door, staring outside, toward the B-Z-B rig. The engine sound rose swiftly to a roar and the massive load lurched forward. The strain nearly killed the engine. A trucker didn't abuse a rig that way, gearing into his power before it had warmed up.

Joe headed out at a dead run toward the rear of the big green rig, which was moving forward now out of its parking space into the wide driveway leading out of the truck stop.

He raced forward along the flank of the semi-trailer. The tractor was making a wide turn as Joe's run took him past the front curve of the trailer. He spurted, sprang up, got a foot on the cab's high step. His left hand secured a hold on the long iron bracket of the rear-view mirror. His right hand gripped the locked door handle.

Pressed close to the rain-streaked glass, Joe got a close-up view of the driver, who stared expressionlessly at him. The dark eyes were under the visor of a trucker's cap now. But this was the man who had handled the shotgun on the right side of the road, the one who had clubbed him.

SUDDENLY the door handle seemed to fall away. The hijacker unlocked it and slammed his shoulder against the door, throwing it violently open. Joe lost his right-hand grip and the impact knocked his foot from the step. The tractor's turn brought the front left pair of the trailer's massive wheels hooking around in a deadly arc that would crush him if he fell.

He clung precariously to the mirror bracket with his left hand, clawing to get a new hold on the door. The door was pulled shut. The trucker inside cranked the window down and struck at Joe's knuckles with a jackhandle. Joe slammed his right fist in through the open window. The outlaw trucker dodged the blow, but Joe had an arm inside. He grabbed the steering wheel and

held on. He freed his left hand and got it inside the cab and clung with both hands to the steering wheel.

The effect was to lock the front wheels in a turn that would have brought the rig smashing into another parked truck. The driver yanked the emergency. Joe unlatched the door from inside, dropped to the wet pavement, hauling the door open. He catapulted upward, driving blows into the trucker, who backed across the seat.

Joe beat him to the shotgun in the bunk and thrust the muzzle into his ribs.

"Where's my wife?"

"She ain't hurt. Take it easy, pal! They just tied her up and put her out of the way in the bunk in your rig."

"Where, I said!"

"About a mile from where we got you."

Running, shouting truckers poured out of the lounge and mobbed the truck. Joe shouted out to them.

"Got one of them. Will you hop to and unhitch his trailer? This mug is going to take me to my wife!"

In minutes, the wiring and airlines were disconnected from the trailer. Joe, at the wheel, released the lock mechanism and rolled the tractor free. Ken was aboard, sitting with his back to the right door, holding the shotgun on the outlaw trucker, as Joe headed out onto the old road. Other drivers were unhitching their tractors. Within a mile there was a cavalcade of powerful,

DATELINE—Death

A Novelette by John D. MacDonald

A night is never so silent as when it cries Murder . . . A corpse is never so loud as when it sighs vengeance . . . and death came never so dear as when a cold-brained reporter bought it for himself—with the life of the woman he loved!



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truncated detached tractors. Joe took the rises at sixty, the dips at eighty, knowing he had, even on this wet pavement, enough weight and traction with gripper front tires and double-drive wheels in back.

The hijacker, whose name was Baalmark, came alert. "It's this next ridge."

Joe slowed the tractor, let the climb do his braking. He hand-signaled the tractors following, made his turn. The ridge road was like the one where they'd hijacked him. Driving along the puddled ruts, he said, "This is the spot where you planned to get me, isn't it, Baalmark?"

"I never planned nothing. I just work in the setup," he answered sullenly. "Yeah, this is where they figured to tag you, but there was traffic. So we went on to the other place. I just went along with them so as I could handle your rig and bring it back here to where my rig was waiting."

"Just an innocent trucker!" Joe said disgustedly. "All you did was sneak up in back of me and knock me out and drive my truck with my wife tied up in it. Then all you did was load all my cargo into your rig. . ."

"I never loaded nothing. I don't do that kind of work. They had three common-labor loaders for that."

"A proud man," Ken said bitingly. "A skilled worker."

"All I say is, being we're all truckers, don't hold it against me if Mac and Freddy and the boys have already beat it, headed for the warehouse."

"If they've beat it, Baalmark," Ken said, "you better start praying that they left his wife here unharmed."

Joe knew he was driving badly. He was so nervous he couldn't feel the ground under his wheels the way he should. They were fully a quarter mile into the woods. It was a bleak, empty area, made worse by the rain. Ahead, the road made a turn. He felt Baalmark tighten beside him. They swung into an open area a couple of hundred yards across. He saw his rig there on the soft ground off the road.

He drove up alongside his cab. "Give me the shotgun, Ken."

Ken handed it across. They could both see the sedan on the other side of the truck. It was moving, as though Mac had heard his approach and had tried to circle around out of sight. If he'd planned to make a run

for it, the presence of a dozen more truck-tractors rolling into the area changed his mind. The sedan whined into reverse, backing toward the front of Joe's rig. Joe entered his tractor's cab from the left. He went onto his knees on the seat. Marti was bound and gagged there in the bunk. She stared at him, began to blink and to cry.

The right door opened. Mac started to climb up, revolver in hand, saying over his shoulder. "Hell, we'll take his woman. Nobody'll give us no trouble getting away when we got a gun at her head."

Then Mac saw Joe. His face turned to stone. The revolver leaped in his hand, roaring. A bullet crashed through the roof as Joe fired one barrel of the shotgun. Mac went over backwards, his arms flapping. Freddy jumped out of the way of the falling body. Joe leaped out with the shotgun, and Freddy went under the truck on his belly. Joe aimed the shotgun under, and Freddy backed out slowly on hands and knees without Joe's saying a word.

* * *

Marti was flouncing around their hotel suite, alternately admiring herself in the mirror, popping a chocolate in her mouth, and looking down onto Broadway.

"What I don't understand, Joe, is why Baalmark stopped at the truck stop."

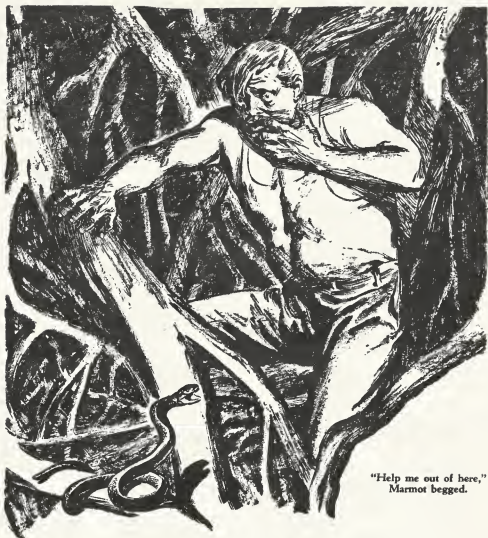
"Don't you remember, honey? The overload. He wanted to lay low till the cops stopped weighing before driving on the main highway."

"But if he waited you were bound to catch him."

"He didn't expect to see me at all. And he could have driven that stolen cargo on over to Cleveland to that crook warehouse he was headed for without anybody suspecting. Even if the alarm had gone out about a stolen cargo, the cops would have been looking for a JOMAR truck. But when I showed up and he found out the cops were coming there and would question him, probably in my presence, he knew he'd better scam. He knew I'd recognize him."

"Joe," Marti said soberly, "we got in all that trouble because you were illegally loaded. So. . ."

"Got out of it for the same reason, too," he said. "But I wouldn't outvote you in the affairs of JOMAR even if I could."



"Help me out of here,"
Marmot begged.

A TIME FOR DYING

By LARRY HOLDEN

The lady didn't mind being alone with Woody on that storm-tossed boat, for she had already died. But Woody now —Woody still had it ahead of him. . . .

THE murderer, Marmot, picked Woody up in a gin mill at one A.M., and after that he stayed with him, watching, calculating, waiting for the exact moment of drunkenness at which Woody would be manageable without being unconscious.

Woody realized none of this. The night was full of faces, floating happily by, like

jellyfish on a summer sea. Woody was celebrating; he was on a vast, joyous toot of triumph, for that very afternoon old man Haskins had signed over the charter boat, *Coquina*, to him, and had formally and finally retired. The terms were so unbelievably generous that every time Woody lifted his glass he grinned a toast. The world was such a delightful place that there were many toasts, and by one A.M. he was really looping.

Marmot found him in the gin mill sitting privately at a side table beaming at the empty chair opposite. Marmot had come in as if walking hand in hand with fear, and terror only a step behind. He had been drinking steadily and desperately, but it needed more than liquor to change the fact that his wife lay dead in the stateroom of their cruiser, anchored at the Yacht Basin dock, more than liquor to change the fact that he had swung the fire extinguisher that had bloodily crushed her skull. But the sight of Woody, happily toasting the empty chair, brought Marmot's aimless flight to a sharp and sudden focus.

A face swam into the line of Woody's vision and hovered there. He knew it was a face because there was a hole in it that opened and closed and voice sounds came forth. He could not distinguish Marmot's weak, fleshy chin, or his petulant mouth, but it did not matter. Everything was so wonderful.

"Gonna get married now," he announced happily. "Wonderful girl. Big s'prise."

Fresh drinks appeared on the table. The mouth opened and closed. The voice said, "Can you swim?"

Swim? Go swimming? He could swim like a trout, but he didn't want to go swimming. He wanted to drink another toast to old man Haskins. And one to Gracie. But swim? He laughed and said, "No."

"Can you run a boat, a cruiser?"

Woody gave the face a chiding glance. The *Coquina*, his very own now, was a cruiser. What did this face want, anyway? To go out in the *Coquina* at this hour of night?

He shook his head and said, "No." Then mysteriously, "Gracie," meaning that Gracie was to be the first to go out in the *Coquina* under his skipper'ship.

To Marmot, all this meant something entirely different. It meant that Woody could

neither swim nor run a boat. That Woody was, in fact, made to order. Marmot had the bottle brought to the table.

The gin mill closed at three. Woody lurched from his chair and looked hazily around the emptying room.

"Gonna get married," he said solemnly. "Big s'prise."

HE DID not seem a whit drunker than he had at one. Marmot's face was whiter and his hands trembled as he slipped the waiter a ten-dollar bill in exchange for two flat pints. Dawn was a bony finger of gray in the eastern sky when Woody reeled all but helplessly out on the Yacht Basin dock, clutching an envelope Marmot had thrust into his hand.

The watchman yelled, "Hey, you! Where you think you're going?" and plodded up the dock in the thinning darkness. He recognized Woody at six paces and growled, "What's got into you?"

Woody beamed foolishly on him and swayed. "Ferg'son," he said with an air of triumph. Ferguson was the watchman's name.

"What's this?"

The watchman took the envelope Woody was carrying and read the note inside.

Mr. Ferguson: This is Johnny Woods, who is going to repair my boat. Please pass him. Orin Marmot.

Marmot let out a harsh breath as the watchman took Woody's arm and led him up the dock, talking sternly to him.

"Oughta be ashamed getting soused like this, Woody. You never got soused before. What's got into you . . . ?"

He watched until he saw the watchman help Woody into the cockpit of the cruiser. That was as far as they'd get. The salon, with its grisly occupant, was securely locked.

Marmot slipped into the warm water and silently swam under the dock. Overhead, he heard Ferguson's plodding footsteps returning. He waited until they stopped, as Ferguson went back into his shack, then swam over to the side of the cruiser. He climbed the swimming ladder and slipped over the side. There was no apparent reason for it, but the moment he touched Woody, he began to tremble violently again, as if he had touched a corpse.

As swiftly as he could, he pulled off

Woody's striped Basque shirt and drew it on himself. He dragged Woody into the salon, then came out and securely locked the door again, rattling the knob several times as if to reassure himself that it was really locked. He stepped to the controls of the cruiser and took a deep breath. He almost fainted when he remembered that the boat was still moored with both bow and stern lines. If he had started the engines then, Ferguson would have come running and it would have been all over.

Stealthily he cast off the lines and staggered back to the controls. He ransacked his mind. Was there anything else he had overlooked? He couldn't think. The words, *anything else, anything else, anything else*, spun senselessly until his head reeled. He stretched out a faltering forefinger and pressed the starter button. The motors roared thunderously. Without giving them time to warm up, Marmot headed out into the bow at the pass between Dinghy Key and Treasure Island, purposely steering such a crazy course that it would be obvious to anyone watching that there was a drunk-en man at the wheel.

The watchman came pounding up the dock, shouting angrily, "You damn fool, come back here! Damn it, Woody . . ."

Marmot licked tremulously at the sweat that bebbled his upper lip. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw Ferguson standing at the end of the dock, futilely brandishing his arms. He turned back to his course and gave the engines full throttle. He leaned precariously over the side and peered through the window into the salon. His heart lurched as he saw Woody roll over on his side, then heavily push himself to a sitting position. Marmot pulled himself hurriedly back to the bridge and felt for the .45 automatic that hung beside the controls in a leather holster. Then, to relieve the terrible tension, he threw back his head and screamed at the top of his lungs.

THE scream came to Woody as the cry of a hungry gull. He was sitting up, leaning now in the angle of the lounge seat and the side wall. He felt the throb of the engines, and he was trying to puzzle it out.

Out of his alcoholic haze came the awful thought that the *Coquina* was running wild, helpless, while he lay down here in the cabin. He lunged to his feet with a cry, al-

ready half sobered. The pitch of the cruiser sent him staggering across the salon and he crashed into the dropleaf table. He clutched the table and stared at it. A table? There wasn't any table in the cabin of the *Coquina*. This wasn't the *Coquina*. This was too big, too luxurious. But how . . .

He rubbed his chin, half grinned and said, "Whew!" The things that happened when you were on a toot!

In little snatches, he began to remember. Ferguson. He remembered Ferguson. Ferguson had put him aboard. But why? Ferguson knew he belonged to the *Coquina*. A note, a note in an envelope. Somebody had given him a note in an envelope, something to do with the cruiser he was on, but he couldn't figure that one out. He was still too fuzzy for such close reasoning.

The cruiser was pitching quite heavily. He glanced through the window. They were going through the pass out into the Gulf, Treasure Island to starboard, Dinghy Key to port. A half-mile beyond was Pelican Key, a God-forsaken strip of mangrove, Spanish dagger, scrub pine, horseshoe crabs and water moccasin. What were they doing out here—going fishing? He didn't want to go fishing. He wanted to get back to the *Coquina*. He grinned again, remembering that he was now master of the *Coquina*. He wanted to go back to the dock and admire it. He wanted to stand on the tiny flying bridge and be monarch of all he surveyed, or something. He wanted to call Gracie up, as soon as she returned from Miami, and casually—oh, so casually!—invite her out for a cruise among the Keys, and watch her face when she learned the stupendous news.

He didn't know whose boat he was on, and he didn't care. He wanted to get back to the *Coquina*. He bent over the basin in the galley and splashed his face with water to wash the cobwebs out of the uneasy corners of his mind.

The cruiser was in the Gulf now, and she was rolling badly and pitching. She was taking the seas heavily on her slim, aristocratic nose, and standing there in the salon was like standing inside a well-beaten bass drum. Something in the forward stateroom rumbled and thudded against the door. A good sailor, Woody knew the damage it could cause, and he opened the door. . . .

Two paralyzed minutes later he closed it

again and unconsciously wiped his right palm down his thigh, feeling slightly sick at what he had seen in there on the floor. It was the heavy fire extinguisher that had been banging against the door, but at that moment he would not have touched that ugly encrusted thing if it had been battering holes in the hull.

He turned and sprang for the door that opened to the cockpit. It was locked and he rattled the knob savagely. A face appeared in the port to his right, twitching. A hand appeared with a gun and violently ordered him back from the door.

Wholly sober, Woody stepped back from the door. He glanced at the windows. They could be slid open, but open or closed, they were too small for anything larger than a trout to wriggle through. There was no way out to the forward cockpit—and, anyway, that maniac out there at the controls had looked as if he meant everything the gun had implied.

He clenched his fists and looked around the salon for something he could use as a weapon. There were pots and pans in the galley, an electric iron; in the salon there was the dropleaf table, a bronze ashtray, a pair of copper lamps. He lifted the hatch cover in the middle of the floor and found a collapsible rubber boat and a pair of aluminum oars. But there was nothing that was proof against bullets.

WITH the suddenness of murder itself, the engines stopped. Woody leaped to the window. Aft, Pelican Key was a thin line of white and green and the sea between was serried with whitecaps, like rows of teeth. The sky was a smoldering gray, and the wind was coming up strong. A series of rending crashes came from the outside, as if someone were hacking the cruiser to bits. Woody lunged to the porthole and flattened his right cheek against it.

Panting, Marmot gave the controls a final, smashing blow, then tossed the fire axe over the side. Ignoring Woody at the port, he stripped down to a pair of swimming trunks and lashed a cushion-type life preserver around his waist. His face was contorted, and he kept throwing anxious glances at the sky, at the tossing sea. Tripping and staggering in his haste, he gathered up an armful of life preservers he had piled in the cockpit and threw them over

the side. He hesitated over the .45, then it, too, followed the life preservers. He threw one last glance at the locked salon, and Woody saw in full the drained, fleshy face, the weak, tremulous mouth, the muscle jerking in the sagging cheek. Then Marmot turned and, in a stumbling run, dived over the bow and struck out for shore with a clean, powerful stroke.

Woody stared, unbelieving. First, that the man thought he could live in that mounting sea. The gale was coming up fast, and already Marmot's bobbing head was lost in the fierce chop. No one could outswim what was coming.

Then the full significance of his own position burst upon Woody. The helpless cruiser was wallowing drunkenly, and it would soon be obviously in distress, a signal for the Coast Guard to pull up alongside—and find him aboard with the murdered woman!

That was it, that was the whole strategy. Grimly, Woody glanced toward the window and wondered if the murderer were enjoying his triumph, as stroke by stroke he began to realize the hopelessness of his struggle to reach the shore.

Not once did it occur to Woody to throw the body overboard, and he would not have done it if it had occurred to him. He had seen the condition of bodies washed ashore and, though she was dead and past caring, he would not have thrust her into that final degradation.

But he had to get out of the salon, off the boat. Big as the cruiser was, she was disabled and the coming storm would play cat-and-mouse with her. The dropleaf table was of heavy birdseye maple. It went through the locked door as if the door were made of glass. Woody squeezed through, scratching himself on the splinters. One glance at the wrecked controls told him there was nothing to hope for there. And there wasn't a life preserver aboard. Woody felt a rising tide of helplessness as he stared at the sea. It would have been suicide to attempt to swim for it, as Marmot had done, especially without a life preserver.

Marmot had had the cunning of desperation. Woody was imprisoned with the corpse, and all he could do was wait for the Coast Guard. How fantastic would his statement of facts sound to the cold-eyed officer who would find the body? To the

police? To the jury? Even to Gracie?

But Woody's anxiety was not mixed with the gibbering fear that had scourged Marmot. He could still think with a semblance of calm, he could still spot the one thing that Marmot, in his haste to spring his trap, had overlooked—the inflatable rubber boat in the hatch under the salon floor.

Woody's last act, before he launched the little boat, was to cast off the bow anchor. The cruiser was a beautiful craft, and it would have been sacrilege to let the coming storm wreck her. There was no bottom here for the anchor, but as the cruiser was driven toward the shore, there were coral ledges on which it could catch and hold.

He lashed himself to the built-in rubber oarlock, then shoved off. His hands tightened on the shore oars. It was going to be a muscle-cracking job.

HE WASN'T twenty lengths from the cruiser when he remembered Ferguson. Ferguson had put him aboard the cruiser, and when the police asked their questions, Ferguson would remember. Dismay seemed to drain him of strength. He was actually worse off now than if he had stayed aboard, for now he had to fight the angry sea as well, to remain alive.

He looked over his shoulder, straining for a glimpse of Marmot amid the waves. His only hope lay with Marmot, the real murderer. Alive, Marmot was his alibi. Dead, the police could say Woody had killed him as well.

He rowed. At times the height of the sea hid the cruiser from him entirely, and then, finally it *was* gone. The little rubber boat was so light and bobbed so crazily that half the time Woody was thrashing the air emptily with his oars and he seemed to be getting nowhere in a nightmare of water and wind. The rain came, slanting stingingly into his face, and that alone told him that he was still heading for shore. He had no other way of knowing, for he had no horizon but the jagged peaks of the surrounding waves. The wind came driving hard. Finding Marmot in that maelstrom would have been nothing but crazy, fantastic luck. He rowed. Fatigue was just another thing that came out of the rising storm, like the tear of the wind, like the fist of the waves, another thing he had to battle.

Stray thoughts scudded across his mind—thoughts of Gracie, incredulous, then delighted when she learned that he now owned the *Coquina*; thoughts of the *Coquina* riding calmly in a quiet bay on a sunlit afternoon, Gracie fishing off the bow, himself at the controls on the bridge; Gracie had never trolled for tarpon. In this crashing nightmare, it was sometimes hard to separate the visions from the reality. He had been out in a storm before, but never in a ten-foot rubber boat. His mind reeled with the immensity of it.

He did not recognize the final wave that seized the little boat in its teeth, but suddenly he was amid the roar and violence of the surf. Somehow, the boat had struck something and capsized, leaving him choking and flailing in the green water. Frantically he tried to pull himself free of the line that tied him to the boat, for it was dragging him out to sea again. He was tumbled into the branches of one of the dead, fallen trees that spiked the tiny beach of Pelican Key, and he clung to it, holding his face barely above water, sobbing for breath and strength.

The boat was still a powerful drag on the line, and, catching sight of it as it streamed seaward, he could see why. The wave had flung it into the tree and it had been ripped open from bow to stern. It lay flat on the water like the carcass of a manta ray. Clinging to the branches with one arm, he worked his knife out of his pocket and cut himself free. It immediately disappeared into the sea. He waited until he saw the rhythm of the waves, waited until the big one thundered by, then scrambled for the shore as the smaller one raged after him like a terrier. He staggered into the soft sand and fell full length.

THE sounds of the storm receded from him. He lay with his head cradled in the bend of his arm. It was sheer luxury, not having to move. Then, slowly, that passed and he could no longer lie still. He sat up. A few feet away from him, one of the hollow aluminum oars had been tossed ashore, but of the boat there was no sign. The breakers snarled along the shore, but it was a changed world, looking at it from the land.

He was astounded. It was a storm, all right, but nothing even approaching the

hurricane intensity he had thought it. The waves were not mountains, and the wind did not have a maniacal shriek, though it was strong enough to chill him to the bone.

He thrust himself to his feet and winced as his right ankle buckled under him. He had gotten that when he was flung into the tree. He hopped over to the oar and picked it up. In this soft sand it was a bad crutch, but it was better than nothing. And, anyway, he did not want to go exploring; all he wanted was shelter from the wind.

He was on the southernmost tip of Pelican Key, a scrap of beach hardly as large as half a city block.

Wryly, he muttered, "Thank God for small mercies." But it was more than a small mercy, for the rest of the Key was nothing more than a water moccasin-infested mangrove swamp. Even without the snakes, to have been flung into the tough tangle of mangrove roots would have gotten him worse than a twisted ankle. The mangrove was a tree that grew on a multitude of stilts.

Woody laboriously hobbled toward the dunes, skirting the murderously pointed clusters of Spanish dagger plants. Panting, he hoisted himself up on the shelf of sand the sea had made. He rounded the dune and stopped dead, his jaw dropped.

There, in the lee of the dune, sat Marmot, huddled miserably over his knees. At the sight of Woody, Marmot's face turned gray. With a hoarse cry he scrambled to his feet and pelted up the beach, throwing terrified glances over his shoulder, as if Woody were not real, but a monster.

Woody yelled and flung the oar end over end. It caught Marmot across the knees and brought him down, but before Woody could close the gap between them, Marmot lurched to his feet and, limping, pounded across the sand toward the mangrove. Woody retrieved his oar and grimly swung himself after the fleeing man. Marmot stopped at the grove and looked back. He ran up and down before the mangrove, as if seeking another avenue of escape, but the grove covered the Key solidly from side to side. In a frenzy, he ran to the raging edge of the water, then back along the mangrove. Finally, whimpering, grasping the trunks of the trees, he fearfully edged into the grove. He was ten feet in and clinging desperately with both arms when Woody hobbled up.

Woody stared at him. With his twisted ankle, it was impossible for him to follow. He planted the oar before him and leaned on it.

"That's just where you're going to stay, fella," he said heavily. "You come out here and I'll brain you. But maybe you'll think it's worth it when the water moccasins come swimming around. They're very nosy, and you'll interest them, but if you stand perfectly still, you'll be all right. They won't strike unless you move."

Marmot's terror was so obvious that it was a weapon to be used against him. He threw a horrified glance at the black water below his feet. The tangle of mangrove root seemed to writhe, and each root became a snake.

Woody sat down stolidly in the sand with the oar across his knees. He wanted to keep Marmot in there. After finding the abandoned cruiser and its bloody cargo, the Coast Guard would make a search of every Key, and Woody did not want Marmot to see them land.

Marmot shifted on his perch to get a better view of the water below.

"That's right," Woody called, "commit suicide. There are probably ten or twenty moccasins swimming around you right now."

Marmot moaned and looked up at the slender trunk of the tree. He could climb up a little way, but beyond that the branches were too frail to support him. He would have nothing but the trunk to cling to, nothing to stand on, and it would not be very long before he would drop off.

"Help me out of here, Woods," he begged. "I'll clear you. I'll tell them I frained you. I'll tell them I killed my wife. Help me out of here!"

"I'll help you out—with the butt end of the oar."

Marmot, he felt, would promise anything. If there were pen and paper, he would write anything, confess anything Woody demanded. But he wasn't to be trusted. He had to be kept in a state of constant terror until there were witnesses to his confession.

Marmot, still pleading, took a tentative step toward the edge of the grove, lifting his legs very high. Woody rose and ominously hefted the oar. It was so light that if Marmot forced the decision it probably would not even stun him.

But there was no force in Marmot. He stopped and hugged the tree, openly weeping. His pleas became so abject, so groveling that Woody turned sick just listening.

Marmot tried twice again to come out of the grove, but each time Woody drove him back with the oar. Marmot cowered there and shrieked. He shrieked until Woody, unable to bear it any longer, leaped to his feet and cried,

"Damn it, come on out. Come out, but for the love of God, stop yelling!"

Marmot either did not hear or he did not understand. He started to laugh.

"Ah, you had me fooled, Mona," he giggled. "You really had me fooled. You were punishing me, weren't you? You were angry with me. I'm sorry, Mona. I didn't mean it. I lost my temper. You know what a bad temper I have. You should have given me the money when I asked you. You'd never have missed it. I know you said I shouldn't gamble, but just this last time you should have given it to me."

Woody felt his heart contract as the chill closed around it. He had pushed Marmot too far. He had gone crazy. . . .

THE storm traveled slowly north and by midafternoon a long pennant of clear blue floated over the southern horizon. The Coast Guard came ashore an hour later, four men and a lieutenant, all wearing side arms. Woody stood and waved his oar. Marmot was lying on the sand beside him,

sleeping. Woody knew the lieutenant. His name was Thompson.

He called, "Hiya, Tommy."

Thompson barely nodded. "We found the cruiser," he said shortly. "The police want you, Woods. Ferguson told them you took her out this morning. Let's go."

Woody said, "Wait . . ." and bent over to shake Marmot. There was a tension in him that hummed shrilly. Marmot had been sleeping, and he might wake up sane.

"Wake up, Orey," he whispered—he had learned that Marmot's wife always called him Orey. "Wake up."

Marmot stirred and sat up, sleepily digging his knuckles into his eyes. He looked at Woody and broke into a big, foolish smile.

"You're not mad at me?" he wheedled. "Say you're not mad at me."

"No. I'm not mad at you, Orey."

"I didn't mean to hit you, you know. But all of a sudden the fire extinguisher was in my hand and you were on the floor. Anyway, you shouldn't be mad at me. You punished me enough, pretending to be dead. I almost went out of my mind." He wagged a horribly playful finger.

Woody shuddered. The Coast Guard lieutenant stared.

"He thinks," said Woody dully, "that I'm his wife, that he didn't kill her after all. I can get him to tell more, if you want."

The lieutenant just looked at him. Words were not necessary.

THOSE OF CONTRARY OPINIONS

A Blackpool, England, man, endeavoring to get his wife to quit her job as a trolley conductor and come home to do the cooking, was arrested for stopping traffic by assembling a crowd on his wife's tramline and telling his troubles.

* * *

A Rockport, Mo., preacher was fined \$25 for giving another minister a bloody nose in a fight over who was to perform a marriage ceremony.

* * *

An 11-year-old Boston boy was hauled off to police headquarters for declaring himself "king of the block" and brandishing with a cigarette children in the neighborhood who refused to bow down before him.

* * *

A man in Freehold, N.J., was seized by police because he became angrily boisterous when he entered a bank and the teller wouldn't serve him a drink.

H. H.

LURE of a LADY

By

ROBERT W. SNEDDON

ABOUT the early 1800's, on this side of the Atlantic, a female host was, like a tiger, devouring all who came within reach of her claws.

The trap she set was an inviting old house set among trees on the pike near Johnson's Crossroads, on the Delaware-Maryland line, and the name of this sinister hostess was Ann Walters.

She came of a criminally-tainted family, originally from England. Her father whose name was Smith, went to the gallows in Canada for a brutal murder. His widow, left with several children, the youngest of whom was Ann, turned her house into a den of thieves. It was impressed on the children that injustice had been done to the father, and they drifted into crime, the son being hanged as a horsethief.

Ann, who was a pretty brunette, married a wheelwright from the South who had stopped at the roadhouse and become ill. The mother found out he had some small fortune, and keeping the family history from the young man, encouraged him to marry Ann. The young pair set up a home at Johnson's Crossroads.

Ann found she had a permanent invalid on her hands so she got rid of her husband with poison. No one suspected her. The sick man was supposed to have died a natural death. Much sympathy was expressed for the young widow who wore black for a year and seemed overcome by her loss, but Ann was a clever actress and during these months she was planning to

turn what she had learned about innkeeping to profit.

She selected the inn described, and hung out the sign: *H'alter's Inn*. She chose the site because customers must be those who had come from a distance, travelers, salesmen and slave dealers—all men who would be gratified by a warm welcome from a young and fascinating hostess with a fine taste in wines and food. For Ann Walters knew how to bait her trap.

As she could not conduct her business—her real business, that is—without some strong-arm aid, she engaged three young men, on a sharing basis, to wait on table, attend to the horses, etc. But during the night they became her accomplices in murder.

It is said that a poor person who came into the place was given the best of everything and need not pay a cent, but that the rich man who crossed the fatal threshold and fell under the spell of his hostess only came out dead, and in a sack. Bodies disappeared in the nearby swamp or were buried in the garden.

To give you an idea of the horror of this den, I may tell you that Ann Walters confessed to the killing of some ninety-seven unfortunate travelers, most of them strangled by a slip noose, drawn tight by her own hands in many instances. She was careful to find out everytime if her intended victim had relatives, and, if so, if he had told them where he was going. She struck down only those who had left no trace of

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their travel through the country, or were not in communication with friends.

From the first victim who was shot as he sat at table she took three thousand dollars. His body was hidden in the swamp. Three slave dealers, with the price of many slaves in their saddlebags, managed to get away from the inn unharmed but were waylaid by her men and shot. A mill owner was stabbed to the heart as he flirted with his hostess, and his body sunk in the river. A mother and child spent the night there. The mother, having money was killed, and the baby, who persisted in crying, soon followed.

Such was the character of this human monster. A few days later she stabbed a Negro boy who had seen this killing and threw his body into the cellar. It was the first of many bodies to go there. No sex, no age was spared. The man or woman who carried money into this death house never left alive.

Many were mourned by sorrowing relatives who did not know whether their loved ones were dead or alive, and many more would have been added to the number but for the foresight of a traveler.

This was a Philadelphia Quaker, William Morse, traveling in the South, who kept his wife posted at each stage of his journey. He had written to her that he was staying at Walter's inn and that letters could reach him, care of a friend whom he had met in the neighborhood, a Mr. Jones.

Mrs. Morse wrote in reply and her letter lay in Mr. Jones' house for some days unclaimed. As Morse did not show up Jones opened the letter and learned that the Quaker had said he intended making quite a stay at the Inn. Cautious inquiry disclosed that Morse was not at the Inn, and had not been seen for days, and that nobody had seen him depart.

Jones then took up the matter with the sheriff, who was already suspicious of strange happenings at the inn, and with

another man they formed a plan to search the inn without rousing suspicion.

They appeared at the inn with a story that the sheriff's friend wished to erect a house similar to the inn and would be obliged if he might be allowed to take the measurements. Mrs. Walters told them to go ahead, but when she found them trying the locked door of the cellar, told them sharply to keep out. She had some wine down there which she did not want disturbed.

The three men went all over the rest of the house without coming on a trace of anything suspicious, and were leaving, much disappointed when they ran into a feeble-minded old crone who was doing odd jobs about the kitchen. They questioned her asking finally what Mrs. Walters kept down in the cellar. The old woman showed such evident terror at this question that without further delay, the three men broke down the cellar door.

The nauseating odor of a charnel house met their nostrils. They hurriedly lit a candle and by its flickering light gazed with horrified eyes at a spectacle they would never forget. The place was a graveyard. Bodies—remains of women, men and children, lay exposed. No attempt had been made to even commit the poor relics to earth.

For a time the three men stood there stunned beyond action, then with grim determination written on their faces went upstairs and into the room where Mrs. Walters sat sewing and humming a song.

She looked up quickly, saw the message in their eyes and ran for the door. But escape was now too late.

In her prison cell she took poison that day, but it was slow to work and the wretched woman was in agony before the end came. And in that period she made full confession of her many crimes to a clergyman, to whom we owe the transcription of her last confession.

CHAPTER ONE

Border-Line Case

HEAT lay a prickly, flower-studded blanket on Mexico City. After the rain, the city would come to life again. Now, in the hour before *siesta*, small merchants yawned in the doorways of their stores and sleeping Indians were already sprawled under the three century-old ash and elm and eucalyptus rising out of the oasis of green between the Avenidas Hidalgo and Juarez.

I was broke. I was hot. I was up to the

chin with *mañana*. Crossing the east end of the Alameda, I thought, *To hell with it. One way or another, I'm getting out of Mexico. Today.*

It was a good resolution. I kept it. But what I didn't know at the time was that a very live Mexican *generale* and a very dead dead man were going to chase me all the way to the border.

I was rounding the Palace of Fine Arts when I heard the crash. In a moment the



*A twenty-year-old scandal and a cryptic blonde
started reporter Connors on a long trip that began in Mexico—
and ended in the morgue.*

LITTLE GYPSY CHEAT-HEART

By DAY

KEENE



He pointed the revolver
at me. "Get out!"

usual post-office corner crowd of petty thieves, lottery-ticket vendors, and sidewalk merchants was gathered around the two cars in the intersection of Tacuba and Teatro Nacional. One of the cars was a gray coupe with Illinois license plates. The other was a soldier-chauffeured Army sedan.

In the back seat of the dented sedan, the only unperturbed man in the crowd, a fat-faced, one-star *generale*, sat picking his lunch from his teeth as he admired the driver of the other car.

I didn't blame him for looking. She was a golden-haired little honey wearing white slacks that left nothing to the imagination and a V-necked bolero jacket to match. More, she was so mad she was ready to start a brand new Mexican war.

I pushed my way up closer so I could hear what she was saying. Wagging a very pretty little pinkie under the nose of the traffic cop on duty, she was insisting she had the right of way and that the chauffeur in the other car had deliberately run the light.

The policeman looked everywhere but at her. Despite the *Estados Unidos* flag sewn on his sleeve, he had suddenly lost all his English. The cop wanted no part of the *generale*. All he wanted was to get the doll and her car out of the intersection.

Then the chauffeur, speaking Spanish, got into the argument. True, the light might have changed, he admitted. But he had blown his horn. Besides, from the manner of her dress, the *senorita* was obviously nothing but a *Norte Americano* fluff.

It burned me to hear him stamp the kid as something I doubted she was. "Now, *un momento, galdit*," I began. And that was as far as I got.

Showing off in front of the *generale*, the chauffeur made a back-handed pass at my jaw. I was up to here with Mexico, remember? I side-stepped the blow and buried my left in his belly. He 'whooshed' and sat down on the pavement.

The blonde caught at my arm. "Are you an American, Mister?"

"Brooklyn born," I told her.

She gave the seated chauffeur a dirty look. "Then tell the police it wasn't my fault and I want that man locked up unless he agrees to pay for the damage to my car."

I gave it to her straight. "Honey, you're in Mexico. The guy is a *generale*. I just clipped his chauffeur. We'll be lucky if we both get off with life."

She started a hot retort but before she could get it on the burner the *generale* got into the act. Leaning on the window of the car, he patted the doll with his eyes as he turned on his Spanish charm. The fault, he said, was his. Rather, that of his stupid chauffeur. He would be pleased to pay the damage to her car. More, if she would permit him, he would escort her to her hotel room where they could discuss the matter over a few drinks.

Knowing laughter tittered through the crowd. The blonde asked me what he'd said. The back of my neck red, I gave her part of it. "He says it was his chauffeur's fault, and he's willing to foot the repair bill."

The *generale* opened the door of the sedan, counting the chicken he hoped to hatch, and the little blonde looked at me, puzzled. It could be I was wrong—that she went in for that sort of thing—but I didn't mean to be a party to it. I closed the door of the car and told the *generale* in my best Spanish that while the *senorita* thanked him from the bottom of her heart she had to refuse his offer to escort her to her hotel, as she had no one to whom she could entrust her car.

He gave me a dirty look. Then the little doll said brightly, "Be sure to get his name and where to send the bill. And tell him my name is Eleana Hayes and I'm staying at the Flamingo Hotel."

GRINNING, the policeman wrote the name and address on a charge slip and gave it to the *generale*. He put it in a pocket of his tunic for future reference. Then he cursed his chauffeur to his feet and in back of the wheel. Both of them cut my throat with their eyes as they drove off. Despite the noise, outside of a broken bumper and a dented fender, the coupe was in good condition. I asked the blonde if she could drive. She smiled, "Of course," slid in back of the wheel and promptly killed the motor.

Nervous reaction was setting in. With traffic as thick as it was, I doubted she could drive a block without getting into another jam. I told her to slide over and

meshed the coupe into gear, and the crowd cheered as I drove away.

Eleana wanted to know what they were cheering about. I told her. "Love."

There was a parking space in the chained-off area in front of the Palace of Fine Arts. Pulling into it, I parked the car and turned off the ignition. "Look. My name is Ad Connors," I told her. "I'm an American citizen, thirty-one, reasonably respectable. And if you don't mind waiting while I pick up my mail and want me to, I'll be glad to drive you to a garage or back to your hotel."

Her smile was as nice as the rest of her. "Thank you. You're very kind, Mr. Connors. I would appreciate that."

There were three letters posted for me on the *Lista De Ayer* but none of them meant a thing. All three were from lads to whom I had loaned money when I was in the chips. But all of them claimed they were too broke to send me a dime. I dropped the letters in a trash can and walked back to the car.

Eleana was using her lipstick. She stopped her painting job to ask, "I wonder if I could impose on you still further, Mr. Connors." She fished in her bag and came up with a letterhead bearing the legend: *Attorney Caesar A. Sanchez*. "I wonder if you'd help me find this address?"

The address was less than a block away. "Sure? Why not?" I grinned. Even that early in the game she was beginning to get under my skin.

I locked the car and helped her across the street, hoping the fact she was being escorted by a fairly husky male *Norte Americano* would spare her too many aviricious stares.

Attorney Caesar A. Sanchez' office was on the second floor. A plump little girl who looked as if she had been crying got up from a flat-topped desk as I opened the door for Eleana.

"*Si, Senor?*"

Eleana said, "Tell her I'm Miss Eleana Hayes. And Attorney Sanchez is expecting me."

I put it into Spanish but the name Hayes didn't seem to mean a thing to Sanchez's office girl. She was sorry but Attorney Sanchez wasn't in his office. He wasn't even in Mexico City. In fact he had received a phone call early that morning and

was currently on his way to Uruapan.

I told Eleana, "He's out of town. He's gone to Uruapan."

I thought she was going to cry. "But that's impossible! He can't be out of town. I have to see him." She thought a moment, then asked me to ask the girl if she happened to know the Mexico City address of Mr. Donald Hayes.

The office girl insisted she had never heard the name, and the little blonde doll exploded. "She's lying. She has to be lying. Attorney Sanchez has forwarded my father's checks for years." Pounding on the desk, she screamed at the girl. "You give me my father's address."

The girl screamed back at her, and for a moment I thought they were going to pull each other's hair. Then the girl recovered her dignity. She assured me I was a gentleman. I had removed my hat when I had entered the office. I had spoken softly and in a considerate tone of voice. It desolated her to ask me to leave. But unless I did, and *pronto*, and took my *Norte Americano* baggage with me, she would be forced to call the police.

Eleana asked me what the Mexican girl had said. I said she was going to call the police unless we left and asked her if she wanted the cops in on this.

Eleana shook her head. "No. Absolutely not. This is a private affair."

She was trying hard not to cry as I guided her back to the street and into a pastelleria, where I blew two of my last three pesos on *cafe con crema* and pasteries. It wasn't any of my affair, but I was curious. "So what's it all about?" I asked Eleana.

She evaded a direct answer by asking how far it was to Uruapan. I said I wasn't positive but I thought it was about two hundred and fifty miles.

"Over what kind of roads?"

"Good but mountainous."

She let fall the tears that she'd been holding back. "I can't do it. I simply can't."

I asked her what she couldn't do, and she said drive through the mountains again. That was understandable. Some folks just can't stand height, and, while some of the most beautiful scenery in either North or South America lies along Mexico No. 1, the road has been known to give strong

men the creeps—to say nothing of blondes.

"You *have* to see this Attorney Sanchez?"

The little blonde said, "Either Sanchez or my father. This isn't a pleasure trip. It's business. This can mean a lot of money to me."

"You wouldn't care to tell me about it?"

She shook her head. "No. I would not. Why? What are you driving at?"

I DID some simple arithmetic. I'd quit my newspaper job in New York to come to Mexico City in advance of a red-haired singer. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. She'd offered me two hundred dollars a week to be her publicity agent. The fly in the ointment had been that I'd built her up too far, and a week after she'd opened at one of the better night clubs she'd married an Argentine millionaire, and I was out of a job. I was also broke. I asked Eleana how long she intended to stay in Mexico.

She said, "Not a minute longer than I have to. Why?"

I swallowed my pride and laid my last peso on the table. "Look. You want to go to Uruapan. You have to go to Uruapan. But mountain driving terrifies you. I want to get back to the States. So. Okay. I'll drive you to Uruapan to see this Sanchez and from there on up to Laredo for my expenses."

She asked if I was serious.

"I am."

"But I don't even know you!"

I pointed out few employers knew their employees before they engaged them and I would be pleased to give her any references she cared to have, including an okay from the local American Consulate.

She wanted to get to Uruapan, bad. "And it would be strictly business?"

"Strictly business," I assured her.

She kicked it around in her mind for a few minutes, then suggested we drive over to the consulate before she made a decision. They were glad to get me out of their hair and gave me a good sendoff. And so it was decided. I was to drive her to Uruapan to see Attorney Sanchez and from there to Laredo. At the time, being Irish, not psychic, I thought I was making a good deal. Me and the guy who bought the Brooklyn Bridge. Only I had a hidden

and unauthorized corpse in my contract.

I found a garage that would do what work was necessary, and the little blonde gave me enough for the bill and twenty pesos for expenses. The understanding was I was to call for her at the Flamingo at six o'clock the next morning.

The mechanic watched her into a cab. "N-ice."

I lit a cigarette to keep from hitting him. I had no right to be jealous. I was just a busted newspaper man who had been hired to chauffeur a pretty girl to the border. Still a lot could happen in a thousand miles—especially in Mexico.

By seven o'clock I'd packed my grips and locked them in the car. Then I hung around the lobby of the cheap hotel where I was staying, hoping Eleana might call and suggest we spend the evening together. When she hadn't called by nine o'clock, I knew she didn't intend to and walked on down the street to Louie's for a bite to eat and a bottle.

Coming back, the dark street depressed me. The slap of my feet on the pavement sounded unnaturally loud. I had a premonition something might happen. It did.

On the far corner of the Calle Edison, a big lad stepped out of the dark doorway of a barber shop and asked me if I had a match. I reached in my pocket without thinking, and the next thing I knew I was flat on my back in the gutter and two other big guys had joined him and were enthusiastically trying to kick in my teeth.

I fought my way back to my feet. The only thing that saved me was the fact they all were eager beavers and, in trying to get at me, they got in each other's way.

I clipped the first lad so hard his head bounced off a drawn steel shutter. Then I realized all three men were in army uniform. It wasn't a Mexican version of a mugging. This was a grudge beating. Either *Generale* Estaban had ordered me beaten up for cheating him out of a tasty tidbit, or his chauffeur had gotten a few of his pals to pay back the knock-down with interest.

Neither of the two remaining lads could box but both of them were strong. They didn't bother trying for my jaw. They worked on my mid-section in hopes of cutting me down.

I swung a hard right to one of their jaws

and a short left to the other one's heart. It was like hitting a stone wall. Then the lad I'd bounced off the shutter rolled to his feet spitting curses and drew a knife from inside his tunic.

This is it. Here goes nothing, I thought.

Then a police whistle shrilled on the far curb and all three of them patted the pavement with leather a few feet ahead of a puffing little cop carrying a rifle almost as big as he was.

When he reached me, he stopped and demanded, "*Quiénes son esos hombres, señor?*"

I said I hadn't the least idea who they were. Then he asked what they wanted of me. No damage had been done. They hadn't even broken my bottle. I didn't want my departure delayed by a Mexican police investigation. "Well, to tell you the truth," I told him in Spanish, "they said they wanted a match."

CHAPTER TWO

A Corpse for Elena

THE phone bell was loud and insistent. I sat up mouthing the cotton the tequila I'd put away had seeded and looked at my watch. It was five minutes of two.

"Ad Connors speaking," I said into the phone.

"Come over to the Flamingo," Eleana begged. "Please. As fast as you can get here, Ad. I'm in Room 2A."

The little blonde sounded worried. Also a little high. "I'll be right over," I told her.

After returning from Louie's, I'd lain down on the couch without undressing. All I had to do was lace my shoes and put on my hat and topcoat. I started out of the room, then went back and got the remaining half litro of tequila. I was still a little fuzzed but not so fuzzed I couldn't drive.

I parked the coupe at the curb in front of the Flamingo and walked into the lobby. A good-looking young night clerk brushed me with his eyes, then returned to the morning paper he was reading.

Room 2A was in the front of the building at the end of a long hall. I could hear General Estaban's voice while I was still

twenty feet from the door. Eleana had been smart enough to leave it cracked. I pushed it open and walked in. Her back to me, the little blonde was superimposing in English her opinion of the *generale* on his hiccup-punctuated flow of gutter Spanish. She was wearing a backless, green evening gown. When she heard me, she turned. "Get this drunk out of my room. Please," she begged me.

As she stood aside, I walked on into the room. The fat-faced *generale* was making himself at home. His tunic hung over the back of the chair on which he was sitting. He was nasty drunk.

The little blonde doll repeated, "Get him out of here."

I remarked that might be easier said than done and asked her if she had ever tried to throw a drunken Mexican *generale* out of a lady's room in the heart of Mexico City at two o'clock in the morning.

Tears standing in her eyes, she said, "Please, Mr. Connors. Believe me. I didn't realize what I was getting into."

"Yeah. Sure. I know," I told her. "You thought he wanted to discuss mountain climbing."

Twin tears rolled down her cheeks. "I can't leave the hotel like this." She nodded at the clothes closet on the other side of the room. "And every time I try to get some other clothes, he stops me."

I asked why she hadn't phoned the desk, and she played back the same record she'd played in Attorney Sanchez's office.

"Because I was afraid they'd send for the police. And the police can't come in on this. They can't. I can't afford any publicity."

I walked on into the room and stood looking down at the *generale*. He wasn't pleased to see me, but before he could put it in words I took a big swig of tequila and handed him the bottle.

"*Saludos.*"

Theoretically, his hands were tied. He also wanted a drink. He took a big one and leered, "*Saludos.*"

Still not entirely convinced I was friendly, he took a second drink. Then his blood-shot eyes lighted in comprehension as he looked from me to the little blonde, and I knew what he was thinking. He thought I was her business manager, and the only reason she had played coy was to give me

time to arrive. He proved it by tugging a fat wallet from his hip pocket and spilling a heap of ten and twenty peso notes on the bed. Then breathing tequila in my face, he leered, "*Quanto?*"

Eleana had taken advantage of the diversion to snatch a flowered housecoat from the closet. I asked if she had another bottle in the room. She said she didn't. It didn't matter greatly. I doubted I could pass Estaban out. His kind didn't pass out. They just got uglier.

"How much?" he repeated in English.

I stalled by telling him the damage to the car had come to one hundred and forty-five pesos and laid the receipted bill from the garage on the bed. He counted out the exact sum, then, after a moment of drunken consideration, added five twenty peso notes to the pile. "Hokay. Get out."

Eleana gasped, "Don't you dare."

I said I didn't intend to. I didn't. On the other hand I didn't know what I was going to do. In Mexico the military, especially in Estaban's bracket, rank one star short of God. Taking a deep breath, I separated the five twenty peso notes from the rest of the money and tucked it back in the *generale's* wallet. Then, as diplomatically as I could, I told him I was sorry the young lady's manner of dress and willingness to accept a supper invitation from a total stranger, even a *generale* as distinguished as himself, had led him to false conclusions. But they were false. Despite appearances, the *senorita* wasn't that sort of a young lady.

GOOD sales talk, but Estaban wasn't having any. Slapping my face hard, he got up from the bed and wove a few feet toward Eleana. I thought he meant to grab her and got to my feet with my right hand balled into a fist, ready to let him have it. But he wasn't thinking of Eleana at the moment. He was after the holstered revolver that he had parked on the dresser. And once he had it in his hand, he pointed it at me.

"Get out."

In getting the house coat, Eleana had trapped herself in the corner behind him. Sobbing, she tried to get past him. He threw out his gun hand to block her, and I brought up my balled right hand. It was like hitting a stone wall. All he did was

grunt. Then, forgetting the gun would shoot, he tried to use it as a club. All that saved me was the fact that I was wearing a hat. But I couldn't take another such blow. Grabbing his gun arm, I wrestled him back on the bed and there was a dull boom as the gun went off between our two bodies.

The fat man went limp under me, and standing up I could see blood staining the left side of his shirt. He lay on his back with his mouth open, and as far as I could tell he was dead. At least I couldn't feel any pulse.

The messes a guy can get into. And this was the big one for me. My trial would be a farce. He was a *generale*. I was a broke reporter, and a foreigner to boot. Justice, in my case, would consist of a bullet-pocked wall and a firing squad some morning in the near future.

No one seemed to have heard the shot. At least there was no excitement in the hall. Wide-eyed, Eleana asked if he was dead.

"I'm afraid so," I told her.

Then she wanted to know what I was going to do about it. I said that seemed to be the major problem at the moment. I did know I wasn't going to stay where I was and surrender meekly. I meant at least to have a run for my money. I asked her if she had told the *generale* she intended to go to Uruapan in the morning.

Cold sober now, she shook her head. "No. It was a stupid evening. Most of the time we just danced. I didn't tell him anything about my business."

If I was going to run, I needed her car—bad. Besides, she was in the thing as deep as I was, and I was damned if I was going to leave her to the wolves. "Then pack your things," I told her. "Neither of us can afford to be here when his body is found. We're going to have to run for the border. And as they will probably be watching No. 1, we'll try it via Uruapan and Guadalajara."

It took her less than three minutes to get ready. Outside of the evening gown, the housecoat, and the suit she intended to wear, she'd packed, the same as I had, earlier in the evening.

Then, a film of cold sweat on my palms, I made her stop at the desk and pay her bill. I'd locked the door of 2A behind us.

It could be minutes, it could be morning, before the body was found. Hoping for the latter I winked at the clerk as Eleana signed one of her traveler's checks.

"The *generale*," I told him, "is tired and requests that he does not be disturbed until morning. *Comprendo?*"

Fondling Eleana with his eyes, he beamed, "*Si, si, señor.*"

I carried Eleana's bags outside and asked the driver of a cab parked in front of the hotel where we could pick up the Laredo road. "You're on it, chum," he told me. "Only you're headed the wrong way."

I thanked him and put the luggage in the coupe. *Generale* Esteban's sedan was parked in front of the taxi. A stupid smile on his face, the big chauffeur was asleep at the wheel, dreaming no doubt of the beating he had arranged for me to absorb. Hoping he wouldn't wake up, I swung the coupe in a wide U turn and pointed it north on Insurgentes. I wanted to get to the border—but fast.

Passing Chapultepec Castle, Eleana spoke for the first time since leaving the hotel. "Thank you. Thank you, Ad. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

I'd put my back against a wall for her. I'd taken a nasty beating. I'd killed a Mexican *generale*. And she thanked me. Now the immediate danger was over, reaction had set in, and I was in as bad shape as she had been that morning. Every muscle in my body ached. My teeth chattered like mismated castanets. I turned on the heater in the car.

Then she wanted to know what would happen if they caught us. I gave it to her straight. "I don't know about you. They'll shoot me."

NIGHT air in the mountains was cold, but with the heater it was warm inside the car. I imagined there were the usual huts and *milpas* of corn clinging to the sides of the mountains but all I could see was what showed up in the headlights. It wasn't much. An occasional burro or flock of sheep and the inevitable road signs.

I asked Eleana what she did in Chicago. She wanted to know how I knew she was from Chicago, and I pointed to the Motor Club sticker on the glove compartment. "I'm a reporter. Remember?"

She said she worked in an office.

I suggested, "Now why not go on from there? I've gone way out on a limb for you, and I would like to know where I stand. What's this Attorney Sanchez business?"

She thought it over and said, "I don't know why you shouldn't know. I'm trying to locate my father."

It was her story. I waited.

"It's a mixed-up affair," she said finally, "but I'm going to be married this fall. And my father has something I want."

I asked her flatly, "What?"

She said, "My mother's marriage license." She didn't sound too happy about it. "You see, I'm marrying Allan Lautenbach."

"You mean the son of the Chicago meat packer?"

"That's right."

If so, she was marrying a balding, forty-five year old, multi-millionaire playboy given mainly to jumping horses and fast women. I'd done a stick on the guy from time to time, and even with all his money he wasn't any bargain.

Eleana read my mind and said, a bit defiantly, "I don't want to work in an office all my life. This is probably the only chance I'll ever have to break into the big money. I mean to take it." Even in the dim light radiating from the dash I could see that she was blushing. "Besides I don't imagine Allan cares very much whether I really love him or not. What he and his father want is an heir to all that money."

I lighted a cigarette. "I see. And not wanting a possible blot on the Lautenbach escutcheon they insist on this proof of your own legitimacy."

She was blonde. She was beautiful. But she was also refreshingly smart. "They haven't so far," she said, "but I imagine one of the family lawyers will mention the subject before the wedding bells ring. That's why I drove down to see Attorney Sanchez and ask him to arrange a meeting with my father. You see Father and Mother have been separated since I was four. He and his brother used to own a circus. And he ran off with a Mexican tight-rope walker. And all these years since then, through Attorney Sanchez, he's been sending one hundred dollars a month for my care."

CHAPTER THREE

Dead on Arrival

I asked her if she was ribbing me. She said she wasn't and told me the rest of the yarn as she had apparently heard it. It was quite a story.

Her mother, Celeste, had been the star bare-back rider of the circus. And her father and her uncle had coined money, until the depression of '29. Needing money to open in the Spring of '30, her father had gone to California and mortgaged the circus equipment for thirty thousand dollars. A half-dozen people in Blue Mound, where the circus was wintering, had seen him return on a night train.

But in spite of all that he hadn't gone near either her mother or her uncle. Instead, he had picked up a pretty little Mexican tight-rope walker and skipped to Mexico with her and the money that might have saved the show.

I said, "I suppose your mother divorced him."

She nodded. "Years ago."

"And now you're down here to get her marriage license from your dad."

"That's right."

Having a newspaperman's dislike for dangling ends, I asked her why her father had stayed in Mexico all these years.

Her smile in the half-light was wry. "Because it would seem the girl he ran away with—Tamara her name was—had a husband."

I said, "Even so, after all these years?"

She explained patiently, as to a child. "You still don't understand. The Mexican girl was married. And Dad murdered her husband the night he ran away with her. There's still a murder warrant out for him. That's why he does all his business through Attorney Santechez instead of writing in person."

It was somehow colder in the car than it had been. There was a lump of dry ice the size of a football in my stomach. It was difficult for me to breathe. That morning I'd been broke but in the clear. Now I was surrounded by murder. I was in the same class as her father. Even if we made the border safely, I still wouldn't be in the clear.

I would never be in the clear again. Her father had been 'wanted' since nineteen-thirty. And twenty years was a long time for any man to run.

AS FAR AS I could tell there was no alarm out for us as yet. At least in Morelia. That much of my plan had worked. If road blocks had been set up, they had been established on Mexico No. 1. Both of us were jumpy but hungry. I had a crick in my neck from watching the rear-vision mirror. The law might clamp down any minute. Still, we had to eat.

I pulled into a combination restaurant and filling station on the outskirts of Morelia, and Eleana went to the *damas* to freshen up while I gassed the car and had the oil and tires and battery checked. Then, while I waited for her, I ordered *huevos* ranch style, little hot Mexican sausages, and *cafe con crema* for us both.

I hadn't been able to see her in the dark of the car, but Eleana looked like a five-star final when she sat across from me. She was wearing gray with a chartreuse blouse. She knew how to make up—and had. She was twenty-two but looked eighteen. And I couldn't help but think what a shame it was to waste all her loveliness on a pig like Lautenbach. As she sat down, she picked up the menu, and I told her I had ordered for us both.

"Oh," she said. "I see. All this for just your expenses."

It was both what she'd said and the way she'd said it. It made me feel like a cadet, living on her money. I pushed back my chair and stood up.

"And to hell with you, too, Miss Hayes."

Then I walked out and got in the car and pointed it back toward Morelia. I hoped she thought I was stealing it. She told me later she did, but when I got back to the filling station she was still sitting at the table mashing the green sauce into her eggs as if she had a grudge against them.

Looking up, she said, "I'm sorry, Ad. Please believe me. I didn't mean it that way. It's just—I'm worried to death."

Still standing on my dignity, I showed her my fistful of pesos. She wanted to know where I had gotten them, and I told her. "I did what I was on my way to do when I met you. I sold my watch. From now on you pay your way, and I'll pay mine."

A smile crinkled the corners of her mouth. It wasn't a nasty smile this time. Then holding out her hand, palm up, she said meekly, "Then would you please give me the one-hundred and forty-five pesos you euchred out of the *generale* so I can pay my check?"

I stuck my hand in my left coat pocket, and there they were. It wasn't that funny, but both of us being keyed-up as we were we laughed until the little Indian waitress thought we both were crazy. After that we got along fine.

It was still early when we started on. I wanted to head directly for Guadalajara but Eleana pointed out, not unreasonably, that even if the police were watching the Laredo road for us, the larger cities would undoubtedly be alerted and we would be as safe in Uruapan as we would be anywhere else. We might even be wise to hole up there for a day or two until the intensity of the search had begun to wane. Besides, she *had* to see Attorney Sanchez.

I still didn't think it was wise, but I let her talk me into it. I guessed the town to be around thirty thousand. There was the usual market place and plaza and a pretty public garden with a river flowing through it.

Sanchez wasn't checked in at either of the big hotels, but his office girl hadn't been lying. He was registered at the Morelas, a small hotel catering to the better class Mexican trade. I sent Eleana in to wait for me and drove the car around in back and into an enclosed parking lot. Then, for added insurance, I tossed an Indian boy two copper twenty-centavo pieces to keep his eyes on it.

Eleana was waiting near the desk. I registered as *Senor* Schmidt and *Senorita* Braun and asked for two rooms with a connecting bath. Both of the rooms were huge with tall French windows opening on a tree-shaded patio. The clerk didn't question the registration. The farther south you get the broader-minded they are. When the bell boys had gone, I took her in my arms and kissed her. Eleana didn't resist. In fact she kissed back. Then, patting my cheek, she said, "You're nice, Ad. And I like you."

"I like you," I told her. I meant it. She was as good and sweet as she was pretty. There was no heat in her kiss. Any

man who got to first base with her would have to come up with a ring.

She pinched the lobe of my ear. "Now you get a few hours sleep, and, after I've had my talk with Attorney Sanchez, we'll start on again if you want to."

I WALKED through the bathroom to my room. The boy had opened the windows, but the room was still hot and stuffy. I took off my coat and shirt. Then, closing the bathroom door, I stripped to my shorts and lay down on the bed.

I could hear Eleana in her room phoning the desk and asking to be connected with Attorney Sanchez. The lawyer was on the ground floor, not far away. At least a phone bell rang for a long time in one of the rooms across the patio. Then it stopped.

A few minutes later she latched the connecting door, and I heard the sound of water running in the tub. The cool and quiet of the patio crowded into the room. The bed was soft. I was tired. I still had a football of ice in my stomach. It was a long way to the border. I lighted a cigarette and lay thinking about a lot of things, but mostly about how I was pushing thirty-five and, while I had held a lot of good jobs, I still didn't amount to a damn and how no one would be broken-hearted if the Mexican police did catch and shoot me for one of the few decent things I'd ever done in my life.

Something was wrong somewhere. I had plenty of brains and ambition. What I needed was a balance wheel. What I needed was to settle down, say with a little blonde wife like Eleana. She liked me. She thought I was nice. On the other hand, who was I to compete with fifty million dollars?

I closed my eyes for a moment, thinking how nice it would be to be married to a sweet kid like Eleana. I had no intention of sleeping. But I did.

It was cool and much darker in the room when I awakened. The connecting door was open. A dropped towel lay in a drying puddle on the tile. There was a lingering fragrance of bath powder. Eleana's bed had been slept in, but she wasn't in her room.

I padded back to my room and dressed and sat down on the bed to wait for her.

The longer I waited, the jumpier I got. It was almost dark when she got back. I heard her before I saw her. She called from the patio, and there was a frightened quality to her voice. "Ad."

I opened one of the French windows wider. She was still wearing the gray suit, and her arms were filled with packages. She even had a black silk *rebozo* appliqued with big white flowers over one arm and dangling from the other wrist was an oversized straw Mexico sombrero almost all tourists buy and never wear. I asked her what was the idea.

Her eyes were frightened. "I thought I'd kill some time shopping while I waited. The clerk said he wasn't in his room. But I think he is. And I think he's sick or something. I watched through the window a long time, and he didn't even move."

I took the packages from her and put them on the bed. "Who's sick?"

She said, "Attorney Santchez. I've been calling him on and off all afternoon while you've been sleeping. And I thought maybe the reason he didn't answer his phone was because he was deliberately trying to avoid me. So I got his room number from the clerk and looked in the window." She pointed across the patio. "And he's over there, lying on his bed."

I walked across the patio with her. There wasn't much light left under the trees but there was enough for me to see a man lying on the bed in the room she pointed out. I asked her if she was positive it was Attorney Santchez's room.

Eleana counted the windows from the avenue. "*Uno, dos, tres, cuarto, cinco.* Positive. The clerk said it was the fifth room in on the far side of the patio."

I let the pros chase the cons through my mind for a few moments, then stepped into the room through the French windows. The man on the bed was tall and thin and dark. And it was Caesar A. Santchez. At least that was the name on the sheaf of business letters spilling from the open mouth of the brief case on the dresser. Eleana had finally contacted the man she had driven two thousand miles to see. There was only one small fly in the sorghum. Caesar A. Santchez wasn't sick. He was dead. And the pearl handle of the stiletto that had killed him was still protruding from his chest.

ELEANA followed me into the room. "What's the matter with him, Ad?" I gave it to her straight. "He's dead." I felt his neck with the back of my fingers. "And has been for some hours. I'd say since early afternoon."

"Murdered?"

"Murdered."

"But why?" Eleana protested.

I said that would seem to be obvious. Someone had known she was on her way to see him and that party hadn't wanted her to establish contact. Straightening, I looked around the room. A chair was lying on its back. A waste basket was overturned. But they were the only signs indicating that the dead man might have put up a tussle for his life. His hair was neatly combed. He was fully dressed even to his coat, and his clothes were in order. Then in the last rays of the sun filtering through the trees I caught a gleam of metal. In falling back on the bed, Santchez had grabbed and held on to a piece of gold chain and a locket.

I squatted beside the bed and looked at the locket without touching it. It was an old-fashioned, heart-shaped watch charm with the initial D engraved on one side of the bulge and an H on the other.

Eleana knelt down beside me. Then, before I could stop her, she reached out and pried at the locket with her thumb nail. It popped open, exposing the picture of a smiling young woman.

Eleana cried, "Oh, good Lord. It's mother's picture."

The hand holding the locket dropped it like it was hot, and the gleam of gold swung back and forth with the rhythmic beat of a metronome caught in a dead man's fingers.

Eleana tried to get to her feet and couldn't. I got to mine and helped her up to hers. Even then I had to hold her to keep her from collapsing. I knew what she was thinking. I was thinking the same thing. The DH on the locket undoubtedly stood for Donald Hayes. And Donald Hayes was her father.

She looked up white-faced at me. "Do you think Father killed him, Ad?"

I said I had no way of knowing. I wasn't worried about Donald Hayes. I was much more concerned about Ad and Eleana. Things hadn't been bad enough. Now this had to happen. If we had been in a

jack pot before, Attorney Sanchez's death had doubled it in spades.

Still, being caught beside the dead man wouldn't do us any good. I tightened my arm around Eleana's waist and walked her out into the patio. It was almost completely dark now. A paunchy Mexican business man, smoking a last cigar under the trees before dining, looked up rather startled. Then taking his cigar from his mouth, he bowed graciously.

"*Buenas tardes, Senor, Senora.*"

I bowed in return. "*Buenas tardes, Senor.*"

I was practically carrying Eleana. Back in my room, I closed the windows and sat her on the bed. Coming on top of the Estaban affair, the shock was almost too much for her. Her face was as white as the applied flowers on the black silk *reboso*. I uncorked the bottle of rum I'd bought at the filling station on the outskirts of Morelia, splashed some in a glass, and offered it to her.

She shook her head. "No, thank you."

I took a big drink from the neck of the bottle. I needed it. No one had to draw me any diagrams. I knew what we were in for. I had inquired for Attorney Sanchez before I had even checked in. Eleana had been trying to get him on the phone all afternoon. The local police would naturally hold us as material witnesses, if for no other reason. And once Mexico City learned that one Ad Connors was in custody, the fat was in the fire. On the other hand, if we ran, the Uruapan police would assume we had killed Sanchez. I was dead if I ran and dead if I stayed. Either way I was backed against a bullet-pocked wall.

Sobbing softly, Eleana asked, "Now what are we going to do?"

"I'll be damned if I know," I told her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Resurrection

NIGHT continued to fill the patio until it blotted out even the trunks of the trees. The smell of flowers in the close, still air was sickening.

Eleana changed her mind about a drink and sipped at the one I'd poured. "Do you think my father killed him, Ad?"

I said I hadn't the least idea but the

locket with her mother's picture in it would seem to indicate he had.

"But why?"

I pointed out there could be a dozen reasons. "Maybe he didn't like him. Maybe Sanchez had something on him he didn't want Sanchez to tell you. You say there's a murder warrant still out against him in the States. That in itself is ample reason for your father to want to keep his present identity and whereabouts secret."

I tried to evaluate the situation. There was no light in Sanchez' room. Unless he'd made an evening appointment, the chances were the body wouldn't be found until morning. By morning we could be far away. It was tempting.

Eleana was thinking the same thing. Looking at a road map, she pointed out, "It's only nine hundred and forty miles to Laredo."

I pricked her bubble, before it got too pretty. "Sure. But as it is they're already looking for us on the Laredo road. And as soon as Sanchez's body is found, every local and federal cop between here and El Mante will be alerted for a 1949 dark gray coupe with Illinois license plates."

"Then either way we're stuck."

"Either way we're stuck." She asked me for a cigarette. I reached my pack from the dresser, found I'd smoked the last one in it and told her to sit tight while I got some.

Eleana's fingers bit into my arm. "Don't be long, Ad. Please."

I walked down the hall to the lobby. There was no cigar counter in the hotel. There was a *cantina* a few doors up the street. I bought a package and lit one in the doorway of the bar before starting back to the room.

The sedan was black and familiar-looking. So was the chauffeur's face. As I watched, it stopped in front of the Morales, and the chauffeur came around the car and opened the door and *Generale* Estaban got out.

Sweat beaded on my forehead as two big men in civilian clothes followed him to the walk. The tribe looks the same the world over. They could only be plainclothes detectives, probably big shots from Mexico City. One of them strode into the hotel. The other man stayed on the walk with Estaban.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I left the lighted doorway of the *cantina* and pressed my back against the adobe wall next to it. Estaban was alive and out for blood. And he had found us. I wondered how. Then I remembered the receipted garage bill. It had been a road map to the plainclothes men. All they'd had to do was go to the garage and talk to the mechanic. He and I had discussed the state of the road to Uruapan.

The adobe wall abutted the nearest wing of the hotel. The patio was between me and the two men on the walk. I inched toward it slowly. I didn't know what Estaban had planned to do to me for shooting him. It didn't matter now. He had a better club. His resurrection didn't mean a thing to me. The charge against me was still murder.

The big plainclothes man came out of the hotel, grinning, and he and his partner and *Generale* Estaban promptly went into a huddle. While they were being pleased with themselves, I slipped into the dark patio and tiptoed across it to my room. Eleana was still sitting on the bed.

"Estaban's alive and out in front," I told her. "I'm going to run. It's the only thing I can do."

She slipped her feet into her shoes and stood up. "I'm going with you."

I doubted if anything worse than Estaban would happen to her if she stayed. But I didn't have time to argue. I wanted her to want to come with me. I picked up the *reboso* she'd bought and folded it over her head to hide her taffy-colored hair.

"Okay. But remember this. I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know where I'm going. I don't know how I'm going to get there. And it may be plenty rugged."

FOR answer, she picked up her purse from the bed, threw one end of the *reboso* over her shoulder and walked out into the patio. I snatched up the straw sombrero she'd bought and tried to jam it on my head. It was three sizes too small. Cursing, I ripped out the sweat band. It wasn't much of a disguise.

The last window on our side opened into the lobby. Through it I could see *Generale* Estaban and the two detectives talking to the clerk. Tightening my grip on Eleana's

elbow, I stopped her at the edge of the walk. It was evening and warm and summer. The walk was crowded with giggling girls, admiring knots of young men, and sedate married couples. I waited until three good-looking girls walked by in the opposite direction from the one in which I wished to go. Leaning against the front fender of the big sedan, a drawn revolver in his right hand, *Generale* Estaban's chauffeur turned his head to watch them up the walk.

"Now," I told Eleana.

Tight knots in the calves of my legs, we joined the strollers on the walk. I could feel the same fear sweat that filmed my eyes trickling down my spine. Then what I was afraid might happen did. The chauffeur lost interest in the girls, realized we had come out of the patio and recognized our backs.

"*Alto!*" he bellowed. "Stop!"

The roar of his heavy calibre revolver emphasized the command and a .45 calibre slug slapped the too-small sombrero from my head. A second shot followed the first, and the women on the walk began to scream. Their milling around like frightened chickens was all that kept the chauffeur from putting a third slug in my back. He didn't dare to shoot for fear of killing one of them.

He shouted, "*Alto!*" a third time. Then I heard the slap of his feet on the walk. Both Eleana and I were running now. A cocky Mexican lad, wanting to be a hero, tried to tackle me and I straight-armed him out of our way.

Just beyond the *cantina* where I'd bought the cigarettes, I spotted the mouth of an alley and we started up it for maybe thirty feet. It was dark and littered with garbage. The chauffeur showed in the mouth just as I flattened Eleana against the wall, and he emptied the remaining slugs in his gun after us. I called out like I'd been hit, then whispered to Eleana, "Scream."

Her scream ripped the uneasy silence that followed the shots to tattered terror.

"I got him," the chauffeur boasted in Spanish.

Then he swaggered down the alley to retrieve his kill and deliver Eleana to his boss. It was so dark he had to feel his way. I waited until he was two feet from me. Then I put everything I had in the punch.

Either his jaw or my knuckles broke. I couldn't tell at the time. Pain stabbed up my arm to the shoulder, but he went down without making a sound.

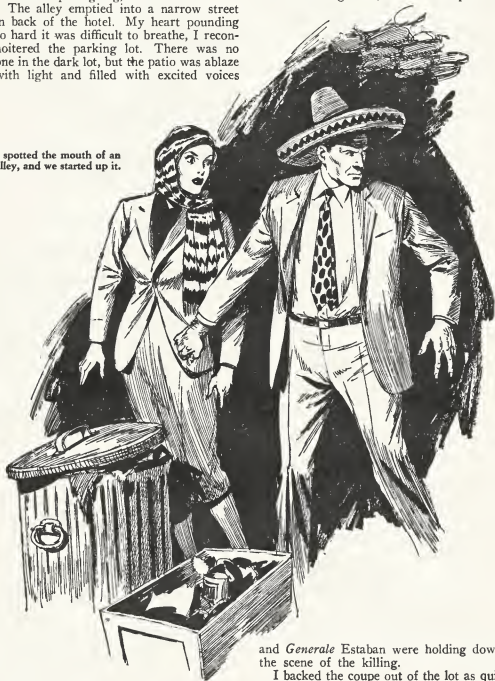
"And now?" Eleana panted.

"We keep on going," I told her.

The alley emptied into a narrow street in back of the hotel. My heart pounding so hard it was difficult to breathe, I reconnoitered the parking lot. There was no one in the dark lot, but the patio was ablaze with light and filled with excited voices

and terse commands. Attorney Santchez's body had been found. From what I could gather of the conversation, one of the plainclothes men had gone pounding after the chauffeur to investigate the shouted orders to halt the gunfire, while his partner

I spotted the mouth of an alley, and we started up it.



and *Generale Estaban* were holding down the scene of the killing.

I backed the coupe out of the lot as qui-

etly as I could, drove six blocks, then parked on a dark side street to get my breath and wait for my hands to stop shaking. Eleana was sobbing quietly. When I could breathe again, I saw there was a car with Federal District license plates parked a few yards up the street. I took the plates off both cars, put the Mexican plates on Eleana's coupe and hid the Illinois tags under a pile of used lumber.

Then I drove on into the market section and left Eleana in the car while I went shopping. I got the kind of black suit I wanted in a second hand store for twenty-eight pesos. A black hat cost eight pesos more. Both were liberally grimed with grease. I bought new things for Eleana, a red full skirt, a ruffled, off-the-shoulder blouse, and a pair of cheap huaraches. Then, rolling the clothes in a bundle, I walked back to the car and laid the bundle in Eleana's lap.

"We're going to drive out a ways," I told her, "and we're going to put these on. From now on we're strictly Mex. And I do all the talking."

SHE sobbed that it was all right with her. I stopped the coupe at the first secluded spot we came to and put on the black suit. It bagged at the knees and elbows but didn't fit too badly. Cramped in the front seat of the car, Eleana struggled out of her smart gray outfit. Some of her fear had left her, and she giggled, "If Allan could see me now."

What I could see was nice. When she was dressed, I drove back into town right down the main drag. Police car sirens were cutting didoes now, but they hadn't discovered the coupe was gone from the lot, and they were looking for us on foot. I parked across from the bus station. Even in the light I didn't look too bad. A lot of Mexicans are lighter complexioned than I am. My eyes are brown. My hair is black with a scattering of grey.

Eleana could have been a blonde Castilian. The black *rebozo* brought out the color in her eyes. The red skirt was short enough to show her legs to good advantage. More, the white blouse showed just enough to focus any male attention away from the lightness of her skin. I told her to smear on more lipstick and rouge. She still looked pretty enough to eat, but the red-smeared

lips dropped her down into the class of the girls prowling the bus station trying not to look like what they were.

The next bus for Guadalajara was waiting on the apron of the station. The agent said it would leave in ten minutes. I bought two tickets and put Eleana on the bus with instructions to hold a seat but not to dare speak one word of English.

Then, walking back to the coupe, I unscrewed two of the spark plugs, cracked them with a hammer and screwed them in again. The coupe bucked and chattered and back-fired like a machine gun when I pulled away from the curb. I barely made the garage I'd spotted up the street. Just inside the garage, the coupe gave a realistic sputter and pooped out.

The lone mechanic on duty had a date and wasn't pleased to see me. He felt better when I told him I was in no hurry for the car. I gave him the name of Luis Delgado, said I was a clerk in the War Department, and, along with the switched license plates, that took care of the coupe.

I made the bus with a minute to spare. Eleana was still holding a seat but it was the last seat on the bus. Departure time came—and passed. I began to sweat again. Just when the tension got so great I was about to blow my top, the driver slammed shut the folding doors and took off with a jerk that sent all the standees sprawling.

Eleana's nails bit into my wrist. I tightened my arm around her. But no policeman blew his whistle. No one tried to stop the bus. So far, so good.

It was dark and hot in the bus and smelled of unwashed bodies. I rode wondering if I'd killed the chauffeur. It hadn't been my knuckles that had "crunched." Eleana curled up in my arms. It was nice holding her. Once at an outpost near a bridge I caught sight of a rifle-armed sentry. A dozen times during the trip faster cars passed the bus. I had no way of knowing if they were police cars.

It was one o'clock in the morning when the bus rolled into Guadalajara. The alert hadn't reached there as yet. The only law at the bus station was a fat policeman.

We ate in an all-night lunch room, neither of us saying much. Out on the walk again, I located a hotel. A small one with a flashing neon sign. I asked Eleana if she trusted me.

She thought a moment, then said, "Yes." I told her, "From here on in, until we reach the border, we're *Senor* and *Senora* Gomez."

A trifle breathless, she said, "Whatever you say, Ad."

It was a Mexican hotel for Mexicans. I registered as *Senor* and *Senora* Gomez, Mexico City, D.F. A sweet-faced Indian woman demanded eight pesos in advance and showed us to our room.

It was more like a cell than a room. The walls were white plaster, unpainted. There was a three-quarters bed, a dresser, a washstand, and one chair. The light was an unshaded bulb hanging from the ceiling. When the Indian woman had gone, I switched it off and raised the shade. The flashing neon sign gave all the light we needed.

"You take the bed," I told Eleana.

She wanted to know where I was going to sleep.

I told her. "On the floor."

Long after she'd gone to sleep I sat in the chair, looking out the window, listening to the night noises. There was the scuff of sandaled feet, the tap of high heels on cement, the laughter of a drunken woman. Then, somewhere in the night, a woman began to cry.

Perhaps in Mexico City another woman was crying. One was if I'd killed the chauffeur. His kind were usually married. Sleep was long in coming. I had never been so jumpy.

For the first time in my life I was a hunted man. If I had killed the chauffeur, I was wanted for two murders. The telegraph and telephone wires were crackling. Terse orders were being issued to every police district in Mexico to shoot me down like a mad dog.

It wasn't a nice feeling.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Bridge of Sighs

OUR plans were laid in the lunchroom the next morning. We would cross from Ciudad Juarez. If we got that far.

Eleana asked, "Then we take a train from here."

I said, "The first one we can get."

I'd picked up a Guadalajara paper. We were in a box on the front page. And *Generale* Estaban wanted us—bad. The Uruapan police were offering a ten-thousand peso reward for our apprehension. And even in Mexican, that's money. There were only three things in our favor. I hadn't killed the chauffeur. The police hadn't located the coupe and thought we were still driving it. The description of us was only fair.

There was more, but not about us. There was no mention made of the chain or locket, but Santchez was described as quite a ladies' man, and a bellboy in the hotel had testified that a heavily veiled *senora* had visited Santchez in his room shortly after his arrival in Uruapan.

Eleana said, "I wonder who she was."

I said, "I wonder," then froze as a cop walked into the lunchroom.

He gave us a slow once-over. I thought he was going to speak and got set to fight our way out. But he belied to the bar instead. It seemed cops were the same the world over. All he wanted was to grift a small beer. The Mexican cafe owner set one on the bar, and the cop left.

"How many times," Eleana asked me, "can you die?"

I mopped the cold sweat from my cheeks. Then I checked on the trains. The one I wanted didn't leave for three hours. I suggested we wait in the room, and on our way back to the hotel I bought a package of hair dye. The job didn't come out perfect but it took the curse of the taffy away, and Eleana wouldn't have to be so careful to keep her head covered with the *reboso*.

While we waited for her hair to dry, I asked what kind of a man her father had been. She said she didn't remember him and wanted to know, "Why all the questions about my father?"

I told her. "Because I don't think your father killed Santchez. A man who thought enough of a daughter he deserted to send a hundred dollars a month for her support wouldn't have put you in the spot you're in. If he had to kill Santchez, he'd do it so you weren't involved."

She asked, "But the locket and the chain?"

"Could have been a plant," I pointed out.

That's when the knock came on the door.

I thought it was the Indian dame wanting another day's rent. It wasn't. It was the cop who'd spotted us in the lunchroom. He walked in, his greed glowing like a neon sign.

"*Senor and Senora Gomez?*" He made it a question.

A lump the size of a baseball in my throat, I said that was correct, and he smiled knowingly.

"Of course you have the papers of identity, *senor?*"

It was a shakedown if I'd ever seen one. From the splash we'd gotten in the paper, he figured us for big shots. And if he could collect twenty-thousand pesos for a pass, why be satisfied with ten? Closing the door behind him, I forced myself to smile, "Of course."

He was greedy but he wasn't dumb. His right hand on the butt of his holstered gun, he rubbed his thumb against his left forefinger. "You will please show me, *senor.*"

It was a wall for me if he took us in. I reached as for my wallet. Then I brought up my right knee. His hand dropped away from his gun, but before the scream could leave his mouth I clamped a palm over his lips and held on for my life.

Breathless, Eleana wanted to know what she could do. I told her to tear the sheets into strips and hand me a towel. The cop was surprised, but he was tough. The worst of his pain over, he put up a hell of a fight. Still holding one hand over his mouth, I had to clip him a half dozen times before I could stuff the towel between his lips and tie it in place with a piece of sheeting.

Then I still had his hands and ankles to tie. Meanwhile he did a lot of damage. A wild blow caught me on the nose and blood dripped all over the room before I had him tied. I used the strips from both sheets to wrap him like a mummy. Then I rolled him under the bed and sat down on the chair to pant.

WHITE as the sheets had been, Eleana asked, "Now what?" I told her the same thing that I'd told her in the alley in Uruapan. "We keep on going. It's the only thing we can do."

I cleaned up as best I could. Then, loosening the gag a trifle so the cop wouldn't choke to death, I looked up our Indian

landlady and paid her for two more nights in advance. The chances were she wouldn't enter the room until then.

Then, as soon as she'd gone back in her own cubbyhole, we beat it for the station. There were plenty of cops at the station but none of them recognized us. In his wild struggle to get free, the cop had punched my face out of shape. I looked like a Mexican scribe that had been on one hell of a bing. Then, too, Eleana's dyed hair helped a lot. The pretty blonde turista had become a Mexican girl.

From there on into Juarez, except for the heat and almost dying every time the train stopped, our flight north in a crowded day coach was uneventful. By the time we reached Chihuahua, I doubt if *Generale Estaban* would have recognized either of us. We ate what we could buy from platform vendors, *tamales*, *tacos*, *enchiladas*, with a bottle of *aguardiente* now and then to act as a prophylactic.

By the time we reached Juarez, we even smelled Mexican.

Once in a hotel room, the first thing Eleana did was take a bath and try to wash the dye out of her hair. I walked down to look at the International Bridge. There were twin sets of Mexican and American Customs and Immigration men. But while I could look at the bridge, I couldn't look into their heads. The lump came back in my throat. I didn't want to die. It would be hell to come so close to freedom and then to wind up in front of an eager-beaver firing squad. . . .

Night was black and hot and filled with stars. As we started up the ramp of the bridge, I saw a star fall. It could be an omen, good or bad.

Just the wrong side of the Mexican barrier, I squeezed Eleana's arm. "Okay?"

She took a deep breath. "Okay."

"And if we're stopped?"

"I'm to run for the other side of the bridge and demand to be arrested by an American officer."

I lighted a cigarette with fingers that shook so badly I had trouble making contact with the match. "Right."

I meant to be right behind her. I looked at the barrier that we were approaching. A slim man with detective written all over his face was standing on the far side of two bored Customs officials.

The end of my spine began to tingle. I had slugged two Mexican nationals unconscious. I was wanted for the murder of a third. A stop-and-hold order had been issued. And there was a cop on the bridge to stop me.

I squeezed Eleana's elbow. "When I bump into the guy with the mustache, giggle like you're drunk."

She swallowed hard. "Roger."

I'd taken a couple of quick ones to nerve myself for the crossing. I was glad now I had. As the plainclothes man turned to look at me, I let my right knee sag and staggered so close to him he could smell the tequila as I caught at his coat lapels, ostensibly to steady myself.

Beside me, Eleana giggled sl.rilly.

Still keeping my face so close to the cop all he could see was a blur, I apologized drunkenly. "Scuse me, pal. Had one too many, I guesh. Strong stuff, tequila, eh? I don't see how you greasers stand it as a steady diet."

His face a dull brick red, righteously indignant, the Mexican cop brushed me off as if I were mold, and straightened the lapels of his coat. "Dronk! Dog! Peeg! Swine!"

I heard him spit on the bridge behind me as I staggered on.

A few steps to my left a U.S. soldier on a late pass chuckled, "He doesn't seem to like you, chum."

Staggering on with the crowd on the bridge, I admitted, "No. He doesn't seem to."

MY NECK ached from wanting to look back. I expected momentarily to hear a shouted, "*Alto!*"—then a shot. Sweat ran down into my shoes. The bridge was a hundred miles long. I was just beginning to breathe again when a uniformed man with a Texas drawl thrust out an arm and stopped me, forcing foot traffic to divert around us.

"How come you're sweating so, chum?" he asked me.

"He's drunk," Eleana said promptly. "Filthy drunk." She fluttered her lashes at the Texan. "And if I ever have another date with the big bum, I ought to have my head examined."

The Texan grinned at her and waved us on. "I don't blame you, sister. It's guys

like him that give Americans a bad name."

On the far side of the American barrier I tried to light another cigarette—and couldn't. It was all I could do to keep from being sick. "Thanks, Eleana," I told her. "Thanks a lot."

She was as nervous as I was. "Thank you, Ad."

I wondered if she was thinking the same thing I was. This was the end of the line. I hailed a cab and told the driver to take us uptown. "And now?" I asked Eleana.

She refused to look at me. "I'm leaving for Blue Mound on the first plane or train I can get."

"Just like that."

She continued to look out the window of the cab. "I'll wire mother and Allan from there. Uncle John will cover for me. He'll tell them I've been sick or something, that I've been there all the time."

"Then you still intend to marry Allan Lautenbach?"

Her pretty chin jutted a trifle. "So far as I know I'm still engaged to him."

I tried to think of something to say, but none of the thousands of words I knew seemed to fit the situation. Silence filled the cab and built a wall between us. Then I took her in my arms and kissed her. "No, baby. You can't do this to me. You can't just walk out of my life."

Her voice was cold but the cheek I had kissed was wet. "I don't see why not. This was just an incident."

"We could make it permanent."

She looked at me for the first time. "Is that a proposition or a proposal?"

I said, "A proposal is fine with me."

Her lower lip was quivering, but she shook her head. "No. Why should I marry a penniless reporter? I owe it to mother. I owe it to myself to marry Allan if I can."

"But you don't love him. You love me."

Her voice was so low I could barely hear her. "Even so. I'm grateful. Believe me, Ad. I wish things could be different. But now get out of my life. Please."

I tightened my arms around her and tried to kiss her lips. "Please, baby."

Almost hysterical now, Eleana squirmed out of my arms and pounded on my chest with her fists. "You keep your hands off me." She didn't realize she was screaming,

but she was. "You keep your hands off me. I don't want you ever to touch me again."

The cab driver eased over to the curb and opened the back door. "What's the matter, miss? Is your date trying to get fresh?"

Her lips compressed, Eleana said, "Yes."

"You want me to drop him here?"

Eleana said, "Yes," again and the driver made motions with his thumb. "You heard the little lady, chum. Pile out."

I sat a moment debating whether to hit him or not. Then I said, "Okay," and got out. "Good-by, Eleana."

Behind me, Eleana said, "Good-by, Ad."

It sounded like she was crying. I hoped she was. I hoped I never saw her again. The cab door slammed. The cab whined in to gear and pulled out. When I could no longer hear the cab I was an empty shell.

I wished I was back in Uruapan. I wished the Mex cops had caught us. I'd only known her a week but with Eleana out of my life forever, I might as well be dead.

Or, so I thought at the time.

CHAPTER SIX

Bars and Stripes, Forever

IT WAS good to be back in New York. Park Row was crowded with people, but as I walked into the lobby of the *Telegraph* no one fought to shine my shoes, sell me a piece of hand-wrought silver jewelry, or a stolen fountain pen.

The office looked just the same. Shad was still holding down the city desk. He got to his feet as he saw me. "For God's sake, Ad, what are you doing here?"

I told him, "Looking for a job." I raised one palm shoulder high. "And this time I'm back to stay. No more press-agent stuff for me. From now on, the two-headed midgets and the red-haired singers are out."

Shad looked around the city room as he tamped tobacco in his pipe. "Let's go someplace where we can talk," he said finally. "Say, over to Jimmy's bar. You're going to need a drink."

I didn't like the way he said it. In a back booth at Jimmy's with a bottle between us, he asked, "What happened in Mexico?"

Just four words. That was all. But my stomach began to churn again. I was almost afraid to open my mouth for fear a butterfly would wing out. "What do you mean what happened in Mexico?"

Shad poured himself another drink. "Just what I said. Here I'm feeling fine about you. Ad's one reporter, I say to myself, who's finally getting a break. There he is traveling around romantic Mexico with a beautiful red-haired singer and getting paid for it to boot. Then this guy walks into the office yesterday."

My throat dry, I asked, "What guy?"

"The guy from the District Attorney's office."

I knew but I asked anyway. "And just why should the District Attorney's office be interested in me?"

Shad poured me a drink. "Because the Uruapan police, wherever in Mexico Uruapan is, have charged you with, and indicted you for, the murder of some Mexican lawyer named Santchez and extradition proceedings are pending."

The butterflies in my stomach fluttered in unison. I'd realized such a thing might happen. But I had tried to convince myself that once Eleana and I crossed the border everything would be fine.

"You kill this Santchez?" Shad asked.

I shook my head. "No."

"You're not lying to make me feel good?"

"No. I'm not lying."

"Then why should a Mexican grand jury indict you for his murder?"

I told Shad the story. What with him having to call the office from time to time, it took the best part of an hour. When I had finished, Shad asked:

"Who did kill him? Her father?"

I said I didn't know.

"This Hayes girl is in New York?"

"No. She's in Blue Mound, Missouri. Her uncle's a big shot business man there and has been since the Hayes Brothers circus folded."

Shad thought a moment, said, "Well, the paper will stand by you, Ad. We'll even advance you some money. But I think the best thing you can do, before we contact the D.A.'s office, is to go to Blue Mound and get the dame's story in deposition form. You won't have any trouble in getting her to tell the truth, will you?"

I said, "Let's put it this way: If you were a twenty-two year old girl engaged to marry fifty million dollars, would you be happy to have every newspaper in the country publish the fact that for a week you had been living, however innocently, in cheap Mexican hotels with an unknown but virile newspaper reporter who is accused of murdering a respectable Mexican attorney—an attorney who, alive, very possibly was in a position to prove that your wanted-for-murder father was never legally married to your mother?"

Shad sighed. "Yeah. I see what you mean." . . .

BLUE MOUND was the first small town of its type I'd ever seen. It looked more like a segment chiseled out of an outlying business section of Chicago or New York.

The hotel was in keeping. The desk clerk whose name, according to the sign, was Mr. MacMillan looked like an old vaudeville straight man. "A room with bath. Yes, sir."

I signed my own name on the registry card. The paper's lawyer had been emphatic on that point. Because of past services rendered, and an exclusive on the story when it broke, the *Telegraph* had agreed to stand behind me, but their lawyer wanted nothing on the record that could be construed as abetting me in unlawful flight to avoid prosecution.

The clerk was a shrewd judge of occupations. "A newspaper man down to cover the wedding eh, Mr. Connors?"

I asked, "Whose wedding?"

He looked at me as though I was stupid. "Why, John's niece, of course. She wasn't going to marry Lautenbach until fall but, for some reason, it's been moved up to the first of next week."

As soon as the bellboy had gone, I got busy with the phone book. There was only one Hayes listed. John R. Hayes. He had both a business and a residential phone. I called the residential number, and a woman answered.

I asked, "Eleana?"

The woman laughed. "No. This is Celeste, her mother. To whom am I speaking, please?"

I told her my name was Ad Connors and I would appreciate it very much if I could

speak to Eleana. She said she was sorry but Eleana wasn't in at the moment, having gone for a drive with her fiance, but she would be pleased to take a message.

I gave her the number of my room and asked her to have Eleana call as soon as she came in, as it was a matter of some importance. Then I found the bottle in my bag and had a drink. I didn't want to cause Eleana any trouble. I didn't intend to cause her any trouble. But I was damned if I was going to let them send me back to Mexico to be shot for the murder of a man I'd never seen until he was dead.

I waited two hours for her to call. Then I called the house again, and a man answered. He said Eleana had not returned. Neither she nor her mother were in, but there was a note on the phone pad asking Eleana to phone a Mr. Ad Connors in Room 205 at the hotel.

I asked if he was John R. Hayes. He said he was and hung up. I waited a few more minutes. Then I went out and ate. I was on my way back to the hotel, when I realized I was being followed. The man stopped when I stopped, moved on when I did, careful never to close the gap between us. There wasn't enough light on the walk for me to see his face. I could see he was both tall and broad-shouldered.

Eleana still hadn't called. There was a younger clerk on the desk, and MacMillan was reading a newspaper in the lobby. He seemed pleased when I sat down beside him.

"Yes, I knew Don well," he said in answer to my question. "I worked for Don five seasons. Three as a spieler for the side-show. The last two as ringmaster."

I asked him what he looked like.

He told me, "Tall, broad-shouldered, good-looking. You know, the type of man women go crazy about. But why are you so interested in Donald Hayes?"

I lied, "I'm not, particularly. But I hear there's still a twenty-year-old murder warrant out against him."

The old man was pleased at his own sagacity. "I knew it. The newspapers are going to play up that old affair." He chuckled. "Both Eleana and John are going to be furious. But I don't blame the papers. It's a whale of a good human interest story."

Pleased at having an audience, the old

man continued before I could speak. "Look. Why not come up to my room and have a few drinks, and I'll tell you what I know about it?"

I'd heard the story once, from Eleana. But it could be he had a new angle. I said that was fine with me and told the clerk on duty when my call came in to put it through to MacMillan's room.

His room was on the second floor in front, across the hall and three doors down from mine. He fished a quarter-filled whiskey bottle and two glasses from a drawer of an old-fashioned wardrobe trunk and apologized because there wasn't more. I said if we ran out there was a full bottle on my dresser.

His yarn was much the same as Eleana's. He did know more details. More important, he had always considered Donald Hayes a fine man. He still did.

MACMILLAN spread his veined hands in apology. "After all, Don isn't the only man in the world who ever jumped his trolley because of a beautiful woman. And it might be well to keep that in mind and give him what breaks you can when you write your story."

I said I would do that. According to him, Hayes had always been good for a touch or a laugh. And if he hadn't gone off his chump about Tamara, being as smart a circus man as he was, the money for which he had mortgaged the show would almost certainly have seen them through. He, himself, had seen Hayes the night Hayes had returned from California with the money.

I asked where he had seen him.

The old man said, "On the railway station platform. We didn't expect him until the next morning, but Don came in on the two o'clock milk train. I thought at the time he was just eager to get home to Celeste."

A bee began buzzing in my bonnet. "This was at two o'clock in the morning?"

"That's right."

"You talked to him?"

"I did. I asked if he had been able to raise the money, and Don said he had. He said he had it in cash in his belt."

"Then what?"

"Then he walked on down the road whistling."

I asked, "And how long after you saw him was it when he killed this Mexican tight-rope walker's husband and skipped with her and the money?"

MacMillan defended Hayes. "I don't think the killing was premeditated. It's much more likely that Pablo just came home at the wrong time, and Don was forced to shoot him in self-defense. And by the by, if you want your story to be strictly accurate, Tamara wasn't Mexican. She was Gypsy."

The bee began to buzz louder. "She was what?"

"She was Gypsy. Along with walking a wire, she also ran a mitt camp on the midway."

I considered the information. "She was pretty?"

MacMillan tossed a kiss at the ceiling. "Mmm."

"And married."

"And married."

"What was her husband like?"

MacMillan said, "He was a Mexican Gypsy. One of the handsomest men I've ever seen. Big. Six-feet-two or-three, weighing maybe two-twenty-five." The old man grinned. "Not disparaging Don Hayes, understand, but I wondered at the time what Don could give Tamara that Pablo couldn't. What I mean, Pablo was a man. We had to have a special coffin built. Then we had to squeeze him in."

"You knew Don and Tamara were having an affair?"

"No. It came as a surprise to us all."

"And you're sure that she was Gypsy?"

MacMillan was positive. "Why?"

I asked the question that was bothering me. "Look. You were in show business a long time. You must have known a lot of Gypsies."

"Hundreds of them," he agreed.

I said, "Then tell me this. It is a well-known fact that Gypsy men quite frequently go around with other women. But how many Gypsy women have you known who ever ran away with another man or ever let any man but their husbands touch them?"

The old man said promptly, "None. Marital fidelity is a fetish with them. A Gypsy girl will laugh and kid and even drink with you. But you as much as lay a hand on her knee and she'll try to cut your heart out." He finished weaker than

he'd started. "Yeah. I see what you mean. Maybe it wasn't Pablo who came home unexpected. Funny that none of us ever thought of that before."

He looked at the bottle. It was empty. I said I'd get the bottle in my room. I got to my feet, and the phone rang.

MacMillan answered the phone. "For you. It sounds like Miss Hayes."

He handed me the receiver. I gave him the key to my room. "Why not get the bottle while I'm talking?" I waited until the old man left the room. Then I spoke into the phone. "Eleana?"

She sounded angry or frightened. It was difficult to tell which. "Yes. Eleana. What are you doing in Blue Mound, Ad?"

The phone was on the wall, next to the door. I opened the door and looked out to make certain MacMillan wasn't listening. He wasn't. The old man was across the hall and three doors down, inserting the key in the lock of 205.

I turned back to the phone and told Eleana, "Something has happened, baby. Something bad. I have to see you tonight."

She said that was impossible, that she never wanted to see me again. It wasn't difficult to control my temper. Her voice still did things to me. Despite the shabby treatment I'd gotten, I was still in love with her and probably always would be. "Now listen, little sweetheart," I began.

And that was as far as I got. The roar of a double-barreled shotgun filled the hall and rattled the door sharply. When I looked out, MacMillan was no longer on the far side of the hall. The door to 205 swung open into the unlighted room. The front of his white shirt stained with growing red polka dots, the old desk clerk and former ringmaster was standing where the double blast had blown him—up against the opposite wall. As I watched, the polka dots merged, and the old man bent sharply at the waist like an actor taking a bow, then pitched forward on his face.

Other doors along the hall opened. The frightened face of the youthful desk clerk appeared at the head of the stairs. Somewhere a woman was screaming. Then I realized the screams were coming from the receiver I was still holding and returned it to my ear.

"Ad," Eleana screamed. "What happened?"

I told her. "Someone just tried to kill me and got old man MacMillan by mistake."

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Body Meets a Body

SET well back from the highway on the crest of a hill rising out of rolling acres and overlooking a river, Hayes House was more of a lodge than a house and more of a museum than a lodge.

It was the sort of a house a former showman might build. The living room was huge, mostly natural fieldstone and heavy timber beams. A five-foot balcony, off which the sleeping rooms opened, encompassed it on three sides. On the fourth side a great stone fireplace, capable of holding a six-foot log, rose unimpeded to the shadowy, beamed ceiling. The waxed, wide-board floor was bare except here and there where it was splashed with colorful Navajo rugs.

The out-jutting balcony formed a natural gallery, and John Hayes had used the overhang to bizarre advantage. The space under it was lined with mementoes of the circus he had once owned in partnership with his brother.

The walls were papered with faded one and two and three-sheets, play-bills, throw-aways, dodgers. There were wheels and whistles and whips. And gilded cages and chariots and carts. Between them hung framed pictures of now aged, or long dead, aerial artists, actors, spielers, bull-men, cat-men, kinkers, fire-eaters, clowns, dancing girls, riders, musicians, freaks.

There were even two moth-eaten lions, a stuffed baby elephant labeled 'Happy,' and an alive-looking ocelot snarling realistically from a red wagon tongue.

The entire east wall was devoted to lithographs and pictures of Eleana's mother, Celeste pirouetting on the back of a white horse, riding one horse and driving six, diving through a hoop of flame.

She came into the room as I was looking at her pictures. Even at forty-two she still was pretty. Her face was unlined and animated. Her chin and throat muscles were firm. Her figure was as slim as Eleana's. Except for the silver streak that time and tragedy had brushed into her

black hair, she could have passed as Eleana's twin sister.

Eleana took a deep breath and introduced me. "This is Ad Connors, mother."

Celeste gave me her hand. "So nice to meet you, Mr. Connors. Eleana has told me all about you."

So saying, she walked on into the dining room to arrange the flowers on the dining table. I looked at Eleana.

She was still breathing hard. "Don't flatter yourself," she said, "Celeste says that to all of my friends. It's just her way of making you welcome. I haven't mentioned your name except to Uncle John."

A tall, broad-shouldered man whose grizzled hair had once been sandy, John Hayes said, "Now what's this nonsense about someone trying to kill you?" He lighted a cigar. "And what are you doing in Blue Mound?"

I answered his second question first. "I'm in Blue Mound because I don't want to be extradited as a sop to a very angry Mexican *generale* for a murder I didn't commit. I'm in Blue Mound because it seems that Eleana's and my little Mexican interlude didn't end at the border. On returning to New York, I learned that a grand jury in Uruapan has indicted me for Attorney Sanchez's murder and the New York police have been asked to pick me up and hold me pending extradition proceedings."

Eleana said, "Good Lord," softly.

Hayes merely sucked at his cigar.

I continued. "As for the attack on my life, a man is dead, and whoever was waiting in my room meant those two blasts of the shotgun for me."

Hayes accused, "And you think it was my brother?"

I evaded a direct answer. "A tall, broad-shouldered man followed me back to the hotel. From what I've been told, Eleana's father is a smart man. He must be to have dodged a murder warrant all these years. Being smart, he knows what my defense will be. He also knows that with me dead the Mexican authorities would drop the whole affair, and the name of *Senor* Donald Hayes need never be mentioned."

Eleana began to cry softly. "I can't believe that of Father."

Hayes' voice sounded old and tired. "You never knew your father, Eleana. Any

man capable of doing what Don did to Celeste and myself is capable of doing anything."

He flicked the ashes from his cigar and went on. "But if it's all right with you, Connors, let's not alarm Celeste until we're certain of our facts. Let's let the sheriff nose around and see what he finds out. There are two dozen men in Blue Mound who have worked with and for Don. And if it was Don who fired those shots, if Don is in Blue Mound, one of them is certain to recognize him."

I said that was all right with me. Frightened, Eleana asked if there was any chance of her father coming to the house.

"Don come here? After what he did to me? After what he did to Celeste?" Hayes kissed the name Celeste with his tongue. "No. I doubt that. I doubt that very much." He indicated the pictures and the playbills. "That was my circus, Eleana. I loved it. It was my life. And Don sold me down the river for a little Gypsy tight-rope walker and less money than we often took in on one good stand."

His eyes haunted, he walked up the broad stairway, presumably to dress for dinner.

ALONE with Eleana, I took her by the shoulders. "Baby, please. You've got to listen to me. You can't go through with this. You can't marry Lautenbach. I love you. I think that you love me. And even if I didn't need you to testify for me—"

I tried to kiss her. For a moment she came into my arms. Then, as our lips met, she pushed me away. Her voice was low and throaty. Tears were standing in her eyes. "I told you to get out of my life. Out of my life, you hear me. I'm marrying Allan next week."

Twisting free, she joined her mother in the dining room.

Supper was at nine. Everyone but myself was in evening dress. In the years since he'd lost his circus, it would seem that John Hayes had done well. I gathered from the conversation that he owned both the local bank and the hotel as well as extensive farm holdings.

Celeste did most of the talking. I had expected to meet a number of guests. Outside of Allan Lautenbach, there were none, although a good-sized crowd of Eleana and Lautenbach's friends were expected for

the next week-end and wedding to follow.

Because of Eleana, I had expected to dislike Lautenbach. I couldn't. I had no feeling one way or another toward him. A lean-faced, hawk-nosed man with a wisp of a sandy mustache, he was typical of his class—polished, well-poised, a gentleman, burned out in his middle forties. From time to time during the meal, his watery blue eyes appraised Eleana without heat. Their marriage wouldn't last. It couldn't last.



"Baby, please," I said.
"You've got to listen to
me."

For a girl of Eleana's attainments, requirements, and desires, marriage to Allan

Lautenbach would be about as exciting as marrying a piece of limp toast. All he had left was money.

The moon rose and painted the lawn an eerie silver. From time to time, as he ate, John Hayes looked thoughtfully, and I thought a trifle apprehensively, at the tall French windows opening out onto the ter-

race. I knew he had armed himself. Every time he lifted his fork to his mouth his coat gaped, and I could see the black butt of a gun in a shoulder holster.

No one but Eleana's mother paid any attention to me. She was gracious, but vague—wondering, I imagined, just where I came into the picture. The fact that she still spoke with a faint trace of French accent only added to her charm. How any man in his right mind and with all of his faculties intact could have deserted a twenty-year younger Celeste was beyond my comprehension. As I looked from her to John Hayes, the bee that had flown into my bonnet in MacMillan's hotel room began to buzz again.

Bill Shakespeare said it first, in *As You Like It*: "Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love."

The meal finished, we had coffee and cognac in the living room. Eleana refused even to look at me.

At ten o'clock the local sheriff phoned. Returning from taking the call, Hayes sat on the sofa beside me. Keeping his voice low so Celeste couldn't hear him, he said, "That was Thompson. There were no fingerprints in your room or on the fire escape or on the gun. The gun is an old one that was kept in a back closet of the hotel. The sheriff thinks it originally belonged to me. He thinks it's the shotgun I loaned MacMillan two years ago when he wanted to go rabbit hunting."

I said, "I see. And anyone could get at it?"

He nodded. "Anyone. The back door is seldom locked."

"And anyone could have climbed the fire escape to my room."

He repeated, "Anyone."

"And you mentioned the fact that we think your brother Don may be in town?"

"No," Hayes said flatly. "I didn't."

There didn't seem to be anything for me to say to that. He was the local poohbah. If he, at Eleana's insistence, hadn't driven in and pried me out of the sheriff's clutches, instead of sitting, well-fed, in his comfortable living room, I'd still be in the clink in Blue Mound, held as a material witness to MacMillan's death.

A slight wind had sprung up. Somewhere in the big house a loose shutter was

banging the siding. Across the room from us, Allan Lautenbach's voice droned on in a dry, chukker by chukker, hoof-beat by hoof-beat, description of a polo match in which he had played. Only Celeste pretended interest. Slumped on the pretty padding at the end of her spine, scowling moodily at the stuffed baby elephant, Eleana was candidly bored.

At ten-thirty she suggested that she and Lautenbach drive to some roadhouse called The Barn. He thought it a 'splendid' idea. She got a wrap, and they left a few minutes later without inviting any of the rest of us to accompany them.

CELESTE beamed after them. Then she asked me if I didn't think they made a charming couple. I said if she didn't mind I'd take a raincheck on the question as my answer might tend to degrade and incriminate me. If she got it, she let it pass. Then, a few minutes after the sound of Lautenbach's car had died away, still smiling graciously, she excused herself and said good night. If she was puzzled by my continued presence in her brother-in-law's house, she was too well-bred to mention it.

When she had gone upstairs, I asked Hayes if he knew the reason behind Eleana's trip to Mexico.

He said, "I do. She wanted to get her mother's marriage license from Don."

I asked one of the questions that were bothering me. "Why go to all that trouble? Why didn't your sister-in-law write to the city clerk of whatever town she and your brother were married in and get a duplicate certificate?"

Hayes chewed on his dead cigar. "Because Celeste doesn't know the name of the town in which she and Don were married."

"She doesn't know?"

"No," Hayes said flatly. He explained. "You see Celeste had only been over from France two months, and, while she could speak a little English, she still couldn't read it. And she and Don ran away to get married. They left right after we dropped the top in Grand Island. And all Celeste knows is that they drove all night to get there, that it was a very small town, and that the judge or justice of the peace who married them had a wart on the right side of his nose." He shrugged. "Not that I see it matters. I tried to tell Eleana so

before she took that mad trip to Mexico. Lautenbach is getting a fine girl."

I said I would buy that and poured myself another drink of his cognac.

Hayes relighted his cigar. Then, clearing his throat, he said, "Now, please don't misunderstand me, Mr. Connors. Since Don ran away with Tamara I've tried to be a father to Eleana." There was a tinge of either bitterness or disappointment in his voice. "Not that Celeste has let me help them much. She insisted on closing the cottage here in which she and Don lived and moving to Chicago, although she still keeps the cottage as a shrine."

"But that's neither here nor there. What I'm getting at is this. While I am naturally very grateful to you for getting Eleana out of what might have been a bad mess, while I will do everything in my financial power to see you are not returned to Mexico to stand trial for a murder I am certain my brother committed, if I were you, Mr. Connors, I wouldn't presume on my gratitude too far and try to interfere in matters that are none of your business."

I said, "That could be taken as a threat."

John Hayes stood up and wound his old-fashioned watch. "Take it anyway you care to, Mr. Connors. Your room is at the head of the stairs. And if I were you, I'd lock my door."

"I intend to," I told him.

I watched Hayes up the stairs until he

disappeared into the half-light of the balcony. Something was pecking at his liver, and I doubted it was vultures. There was something radically wrong with Hayes House. It reminded me of a sealed grave. And I'd covered too many court exhumations not to know that whenever you open a grave you are apt to find a corpse.

I lighted a cigarette and walked out on the terrace. The moon was a crescent lantern hung in a star-studded sky. At the foot of the hill on which Hayes House had been built, a broad strip of silver tinfoil wound off into the night to disappear behind a clump of starkly silhouetted trees. In the distance I could see the faint glow in the sky that was Blue Mound.

The bee buzzed louder now as I climbed the hill back to the house. Seen from the rear Hayes House was even more impressive than it was from the front drive. John Hayes had done well to kite a bankrupt circus into his present holdings. It was, in fact, almost incredible.

Taking a short cut through a grape arbor, I walked around the house and looked up at the second story. Two sets of windows were lighted. I couldn't see anyone in one room, although from the ruffled curtains blowing out the open window I imagined it was Celeste's.

In the other room, still fully dressed, John Hayes was kneeling by his bed in fervent prayer. With as much money and



OUTPOST ZERO

A Novelette of Worlds Unborn

By James MacIntosh

A cargo of death they bore, for themselves and the rest of the galaxy . . . with ten hours left to discover the strange, inhuman purpose of their voyage—to rebuild tomorrow's Earth . . . or face final oblivion, alone between the stars!

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power as he had, I wondered what the man was bothering God about. I also wondered just what he'd meant by his threat concerning matters that were none of my business.

As I watched him, he finished his prayer, stood up, and walked to the door, turning out the light as he left the room. I walked to the front of the house and stood in the shadow of an arbor-vitae. From where I stood, I could see the living room and the drive. There were two cars on the drive, Hayes' and Celeste's.

I waited a full five minutes for Hayes to come down the stairs. When he didn't, I walked back to my former position under the bedroom windows. The whole second floor was dark now. It was something to think about.

I started around the house again, meaning to enter it through the french windows on the terrace. But the grape arbor was as far as I got. When I reached the middle of the leafed tunnel, all of the supports collapsed and the crescent moon tilted crazily. Then, it crashed into my head, and the night pelted me with silence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Grave Matter

A FAINT light burning in the distance, the smell of ether in my nose—I thought for a moment the whole thing had been a dream, and I was still in a first-aid station on Saipan. But they hadn't had feather beds in the islands.

Both my wrists and my ankles were bound. I was lying on my side on an old-fashioned feather bed with my nose pushed into a wad of cotton that had been saturated with ether. A cold night wind was blowing in under a drawn shade. It had been the only thing that had saved me. Disregarding the pain in my arms, I rolled on my back and sucked in great gobs of the stuff.

I seemed to be in a small attic room, and the light, while faint, wasn't at any great distance. It was a small night-light burning under the picture of a good-looking young man who bore a striking resemblance to John Hayes. I decided it was a picture of Eleana's father, Don.

My hair and my right cheek were matted

with clotted blood. My head hurt but not so badly I couldn't sit up and take stock. Wherever I was, I wasn't in Hayes House. The room was too small and the ceiling too low for that. I was in a cottage of some sort, possibly the cottage John Hayes had mentioned. The one in which his brother and Eleana's mother had lived and which Celeste still kept as a shrine.

There was a rag rug on the floor. A table, a dresser, and a chair were the only furnishings beside the bed. I swung my feet to the floor and, standing up, managed to get the tips of my fingers into my right hip pocket. It seemed a year after that until they touched my knife. But once I had my knife, from there on it was easy. Whoever had tied me had been in too much of a hurry to do a very good job.

I looked at my watch. It was a few minutes of morning. I had been out three hours. What surprised me most was that I was still alive. I knew now who had killed Attorney Sanchez and why. I knew who had killed the old desk clerk in a desperate attempt to keep the lid on a coffin.

There was a well-thumbed Bible on the table. I picked it up and, while it didn't fall open at any special place, Chapter 4 of Genesis, concerning the trouble between Cain and Abel, was plenty smudged. I closed the Bible and walked down some stairs, rubbing my arms to restore the circulation. Both the front and back doors were locked. I unlatched one of the windows and stepped through it onto the porch. The cottage backed on the river, and not more than a half mile away, perched on top of its hill, Hayes House was a blaze of light.

I walked down to the river. One of the rowboats I had seen at the dock of Hayes House was snubbed to a stake on the bank, and the grass was matted where I had been dragged from the river to the cottage.

I walked along the river and climbed the hill to Hayes House in the last of the thick dark of pre-dawn. There were five cars on the drive now, Lautenbach's and two police cars in addition to the two cars that had been there earlier.

Everyone was in the living room and still dressed, with the exception of Celeste. She was wearing a long, white negligee that emphasized her figure, and, slumped on his spine on a sofa, John Hayes was looking

at her like a kid with his nose pressed to a candy store window.

None of them showed any signs of grief over me having turned up missing with the exception of Eleana. Her face was stained with tears, and she was pounding one fist into the palm of her other hand as she laid down the law to Sheriff Thompson. I edged up closer until I could hear what she was saying.

"Then look again," she was telling the sheriff. "Search every house in the county it you have to. I want Mr. Connors found, understand. And I want him found alive."

Celeste attempted to calm her. "Now, Eleana. Please. Don't excite yourself so. After all, Mr. Connors is nothing to you."

I thought Eleana was going to strike her mother. "*Nothing?* He's everything to me." Tears streaming down her face, she added. "But it took this to make me realize it. And if Father has killed Ad just to cover his own dirty tracks, I'll hunt him down and see he pays for it—if it takes the rest of my life. I love Ad. Understand?"

Celeste looked like Eleana had struck her.

His face gray and old, John Hayes got up and looked out a window.

Allan Lautenbach cleared his throat. "Oh, I say now, Eleana," he said. "You don't mean that, really."

Eleana handed him his engagement ring. "I'm sorry, Allan. I do mean it. I thought I could marry you. But I can't. Not after knowing Ad." She began to cry again. "And when you brought me home tonight, I went to his room to tell him so. That's how I discovered he was gone."

JOHAN HAYES turned from the window and looked at Sheriff Thompson. "Well? What are you waiting for, Sheriff? You heard my niece. Fan out and comb the county. Search every house in it. And if when you do find Don and he resists arrest or refuses to tell you what he has done with Connors, shoot him down like the mad dog he is."

As if struck by a sudden thought, he reached his hat from a table and shaped it to his head. "I'll walk down and search the old cottage where he and Celeste lived. It's barely possible he may hole up there."

Celeste opened her mouth to say some-

thing, thought better of what she had been about to say, and closed it. The sheriff and his men left, and a few minutes later their cars roared off down the road toward Blue Mound. Lautenbach looked at the ring on his palm, then at Eleana.

"You're serious?" he asked her.

Eleana said, "I was never more serious in my life."

I waited until Lautenbach had gone upstairs. Then I walked in through the french windows, just as John Hayes started out. He backed into the room like he had seen a ghost.

"Ad," Eleana cried. "Ad." Then she was in my arms, her wet cheek cool against mine. "You're all right, Ad. Father didn't kill you."

I looked over her shoulder at John Hayes. "No. Your father didn't kill me, Baby. And he didn't run away with a Gypsy doll. And he didn't clip his brother out of thirty thousand dollars. In fact, all your father did was come home at the wrong time."

Celeste put her face in her hands and began to cry.

His face ugly, John Hayes slipped his gun from its shoulder holster and pointed it at me. "If you are insinuating what I think you are, it's a dirty filthy lie. I've loved Celeste for years. I loved her when she married Don. But there has never been anything wrong between us. Now take back that lie, or I'll shoot you."

I said, "You didn't slug me in the grape arbor then?"

"I did not."

"And you didn't drag me down the hill and put me in a boat and row me to the cottage where your brother and Celeste used to live?"

"I did not."

"You didn't wrestle me up the stairs and onto a bed and leave me with a pad of ether-saturated cotton pressed to my nose?"

His denial was weaker this time, "N-no."

"And you didn't leave a nightlight burning under your brother's picture, because you were afraid to come back into a house filled with dreadful memories for you? You didn't intend to come back and bury me, perhaps right next to your brother? You didn't intend to finish the job tonight when

the rest of the house was asleep but were unable to do so because Eleana decided I was the guy she loved and came to my room to tell me so and found that I was missing?"

Hayes looked at Celeste. The former bare-back rider had sunk into a chair and was sobbing heavily. When he did speak, the words came out of his mouth, slowly, uncertainly, with long pauses between them, like the feet of a man walking that last short mile to the chair.

"Yes," John Hayes said. "That's—right. It was just as you say, Connors. You'd better call Sheriff Thompson and get him back out here. I'll make a full confession."

"You admit you killed your brother?"

"Yes."

"And Attorney Sanchez?"

"Yes."

"And old man MacMillan?"

Sweat beaded on Hayes' forehead. "Yes. For God's sake call the sheriff."

Celeste stopped crying and stood up. "No. It has to end sometime. It might as well be now." Her face was suddenly haggard. "Thank you, John, for trying to take my guilt. But I've lived in hell for twenty years. And what happens to me doesn't matter."

Eleana's body stiffened in my arms. "Mother! You don't know what you're saying."

Ignoring her, Celeste wiped her eyes with a wisp of lace handkerchief. "When we are young, we are sometimes foolish. I was. I made a mistake, a bad one, twenty years ago. I let a momentary, mad infatuation sweep me off my feet." She wiped her eyes again. "And, as Mr. Connors just said, Don returned from California at a very inopportune moment."

John Hayes crossed the room and put his arm around her waist. "You don't know what you're saying, Celeste."

HER voice lifeless, Celeste continued. "But I didn't kill Don. Pablo did. In self-defense when Don found us together. And when I came to my senses and realized what had happened, when I realized the awful thing I'd done, I went out of my mind completely and stabbed Pablo for killing the man I really loved."

She spread her hands in a futile gesture. "That's why I have never married again,

why I've refused to marry John all these years. There's been no man in my life since. I could do that much for Don." Her voice trembled slightly. "It was my cross, and I bore it."

It happens every day in the year. It wasn't a pretty story. It never is. As Celeste talked, the years rolled away, and she was a young mother again, back in the little white cottage in which I had awakened, waiting for her husband to return from California.

Pablo had come to the cottage after dark on some business connected with the circus. Celeste was young. Don had been gone four months. And Pablo was very handsome. She had never been quite certain how it had happened, but a flame had ignited between them. When she had come to her senses, Don was there, shouting at them and trying to shoot Pablo, but Pablo had killed him before he could. Then she had stabbed Pablo.

She sounded like a dead woman talking. It made my flesh creep to listen to her.

Then, dressing, she'd managed to get Pablo into her car and drive him to Tamarara in the hope of concealing at least a part of the awful thing that had happened. True to her Gypsy code, the tight-rope walker had spit in the face of the dead man who had betrayed her, packed her things and left almost immediately, telling Celeste she intended to return to Mexico where her home was.

The pronouncement had given Celeste an idea of further concealment. Returning to the cottage, working until almost dawn, she had buried Don in the garden. Then, returning to the bedroom, she found that sometime during his struggle with Pablo the circus' money had fallen out of his pocket.

To give it to John would be proof of the double murder. So she had kept it, and, a few months after she had moved with Eleana to Chicago, she had made a trip to Mexico City and made arrangements with Attorney Sanchez to mail her a hundred dollars a month for Eleana's care, the money purportedly to come from Don Hayes.

Her voice as dead as Don Hayes, Celeste said, "And he bled me. It cost me a hundred dollars for every hundred he mailed." She looked at the floor. "But it was worth

My Little Gypsy Cheat-Heart

it to keep Eleana and John from knowing the sort of person I really was."

So the years had passed with everyone in Blue Mound thinking Don had murdered Pablo and run away with Tamara and the money. Both men would have stayed in their graves forever if Eleana hadn't insisted on driving to Mexico to see her father and get their marriage license.

The same marriage license that had been in Don Hayes' pocket when she had buried him in the garden.

Frantic, fearing that Sanchez would talk, Celeste had flown to Mexico and arranged the meeting in Uruapan to get Attorney Sanchez out of Mexico City. She had no idea Eleana would follow him to Uruapan. She hadn't know she was in the hotel.

Eleana pointed an accusing finger. "You were the heavily veiled *senora* who visited Sanchez!"

Celeste buried her face in her hands. "Yes, I was the heavily veiled *senora*. But Sanchez refused to listen to reason. I foolishly told him who you were marrying and he thought he could blackmail you out of some of the Lautenbach money." She shrugged her slim shoulders. "He also wanted more than I was willing to pay for his silence, so I killed him and flew back to the States."

She passed her hand over her eyes. "I thought I was safe again. But I wasn't. You're never really safe once you have killed.

"It was Eleana getting into that trouble in Mexico that tripped me. She didn't tell me but she did tell John, and I heard them talking about it. They thought Don was still alive and had killed Attorney Sanchez to conceal his current identity. Then Mr. Connors came to town. There was only one inference I could draw—that he meant to fight extradition and wanted Eleana to testify for him."

Celeste looked at me. "You were just a name to me. I didn't know Eleana loved you. I thought she was going to marry Allan. And I knew with you dead the extradition proceedings would be dropped, the whole story would die down, and Don would be safely buried deep in his grave again."

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I said, "So after I phoned the house
here, you came to Blue Mound. It was you
who were waiting in my room, you who
killed MacMillan by mistake with the
hotel's shotgun."

Celeste's voice was barely audible. "Yes.
And it was I who hit you in the arbor and
dragged you down to the river and took you
to the cottage." She buried her face in John
Hayes' chest. "But everything I've done
was to conceal that first awful crime. I
must have been out of my mind. I must
be crazy."

I said, "That's as good a defense as
any."

John Hayes nodded. "It's the one we'll
use. And with my money and a good
lawyer, it may be we'll beat this thing."

It could be he was right. Murder is
never justified, but I felt sorry for Celeste.
She had been telling the truth when she
said she had lived in her own, personal hell
for years.

And that was about all there was of the
story. Celeste looked appealingly at Eleana
but Eleana refused even to look at her
mother. I asked Hayes where he had gone
after he had prayed, and he told me grimly
that he had gone down the backstairs and
out into the night to look for Don. Then he
took Celeste upstairs to dress, before he
phoned Sheriff Thompson.

I used the phone to call Shad long dis-
tance and gave him the whole thing. When
I'd finished, he said it was a wov of a
story, and he thought that he could promise
me not only my old job but maybe could
wangle a raise.

I said, "Make it enough for a married
man to live on."

Shad chuckled. "No more red-haired
singers or two-headed midgets for Ad
Connors, eh?"

"No more red-haired singers or two-
headed midgets," I promised.

Then I walked over to the sofa on which
Eleana was crying and took her in my
arms.

"Home for keeps?" I asked her.

Eleana's lips brushed mine. "For keeps."

Grinning like mad, I told her, "Put on
the coffee pot, baby. Daddy is rounding
third."

Then I kissed her.

THE END

Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 10)

gold with a plain, but expensive, mounting. She said she was in a small financial difficulty—that she needed ten dollars for a day or two and wanted to leave the ring as security.

My friends refused to take the ring and gladly gave her the money. Promptly the next day, the money was returned with a little gift for the wife. This act was repeated for several weeks, always with a quick return of the money and a small additional present.

One afternoon, she came to their apartment, distraught, almost hysterical. She had just received a long distance call about her mother, who was very ill and wanted to see her right away. She needed help in a substantial way now—asked for two hundred dollars. She seemed frantic with anxiety, and my friend's hearts were torn with pity. Between them they had about seventy-five dollars. They gave her the cash and with it a check for the balance. This time they accepted the ring and the husband hurriedly wrote out a few lines, noting the description and value of it, according to the examination he had made a month before.

She rushed away, expressing her deep gratitude, and said they would hear from her within a day or two. She told them she was having the hotel hold her room and, if her mother recovered sufficiently, hoped to be back with them in a short time.

The following day the husband stopped at the desk. He spoke to the telephone operator, remarking that he and his wife felt so sorry for their friend and that the long-distance call she had had the day before had contained such bad news. The girl replied that no long-distance calls whatsoever had come in that day. The clerk, overhearing the conversation, said that the party in question had checked out permanently the afternoon before, had seemed in the best of spirits, had cashed a check—theirs—for a large amount, and had left no forwarding address.

Hardly believing his ears but full of foreboding, the husband asked for the ring, which he had scarcely looked at before placing it in the hotel safe. He put it under his jeweler's glass. At first glance it seemed to be the same ring, but the stone was different—a clever imitation, but nevertheless only a piece of glass.

There seemed to be very little to be done about it. At the address the woman had given the hotel, where she claimed to have lived formerly, she was unknown.

And so my friends were left holding what is popularly called the bag—plus a bogus diamond ring. Wherever the woman was, she was holding a signed receipt for a valuable diamond ring, supposedly left in my friends' possession. So they were doubly swindled.

E. V.
Chicago, Ill.

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Hank Napheys

(Continued from page 42)

the door, wedged into a corner. The scatter of the gun would get me no matter how I jumped, ducked or fell. My own two guns might as well have been in Alaska. The black muzzle of the shotgun looked as big as a fifty-millimeter howitzer at point-blank range.

Terrie's glazed eyes were fixed on the door. The inexorable, implacable stare of her eyes rooted me to the floor. Then, the very rigidity of those eyes told me that Terrie couldn't see the door. Terrie was dead.

I gingerly lifted the shotgun from her grasp. My palms were so sweaty I almost dropped the gun. My knees weren't too steady either. It was then that I heard the strident and beautiful clamor of the ambulance gong.

I leaned against the foyer wall. Just about one more second of looking into that shotgun muzzle and I would have been a fair ambulance case myself. I mopped my face with a quivering hand.

Once again, District Attorney Plunkett kindly permitted Clarissa and me to leave, after the police cleaned up. Like the entrance of the Surf, my apartment-house entrance was alive with cops and neighbors. I said to Detective-Lieutenant Tim O'Sullivan:

"This is getting to be a habit."

He grinned at both of us and went back upstairs to my littered shambles of an apartment.

The night had cooled off a bit. A gentle breeze played on our faces as we walked along the street. I said, "You're rich, honey."

Clarissa sighed. "Poor dear Mrs. Murphy." Clarissa tossed her silky black hair. "I still think I'm dreaming, Jack. Pinch me."

I did.

"Please remember" said Clarissa loftily, "that we're in a public place." Then she smiled.

At the corner we got a cab. As it rolled toward Clarissa's apartment, I took her in my arms. Her kiss was molten spice. As she came back for a second one, she whispered softly in my ear, "Carlton service, sir."

THE END

Trigger Triangle

(Continued from page 56)

"I refuse to—"

Gram interrupted. "Listen, Mrs. Downey, be sensible. You're in a spot. You can't—"

"But I can, Lieutenant. Certainly I pretended to be friendly with Tjaljo! I was worried about my husband. We were separated, but I didn't want . . . well, I didn't want murder. I thought I could find out their plans."

"You mean you were putting on an act?"

"Certainly! I'd never become involved with a . . . a cheap mobster!"

Tjaljo scowled. "Look, Baby, take it easy."

Listich spoke. "Shut up!"

Tjaljo clamped his lips and frowned.

Gram walked to the desk. He turned and faced Tjaljo. "It makes no difference," he said. "She'll tell us. She has to explain how she knew it was his gun. She knows because she told you where to find it. She'll talk, sucker. She'll tell how she tried to save her husband through you. It's her only out. She'll tell what you planned—that she tried to keep Alice—your patsy for the job—away from him at the last moment. She'll talk to save her neck."

"If she sings, I'll break her damned neck!" Tjaljo said. "She's in this as much as we are! It was her idea!"

Gram glanced at the police stenographer working at a table in a corner. The man looked up and nodded.

Edith Downey looked at Gram. "All right," she said.

* * *

"Sue," Paul said to his wife, "this is Alice Meadows. We've released her, but she still needs some help and . . ."

"I was expecting you," Sue laughed softly. She reached out and took the girl's hand.

Alice Meadows smiled hesitantly. "I don't know, Mrs. Gram. I don't know what would have happened to me if he—"

"Let's be honest," Paul sighed. "Sue made me try other angles. I asked your question."

"Don't let him fool you," Sue Gram said. "He's a good cop."

"I—I think he's wonderful!" Alice Meadows said.

Over her head Paul Gram winked broadly at his wife and blushed.

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